



NASCOE Newsletter

Spring 2020

What A Year It Has Been (so far)



**NASCOE President
Brandon Wilson**

What a year 2020 is shaping up to be so far. The interesting part is that the year has barely started. Up until recently, the NASCOE team had a fairly regular routine nailed down. Routine items included working with management on various membership concerns and attempting to secure additional

funding. In the new world of COVID-19, the job of the NASCOE team has become much more complex. Normally, most policies affecting County Office employees comes from FSA leadership, with whom NASCOE has an established working relationship. This relationship stems from our labor management agreement with FSA. Much, if not most of the policy affecting COF employees which deals with COVID-19 is coming directly from the White House or the Office of the Vice President. FSA and NASCOE leadership currently don't have a direct relationship with the White House to offer input on these major decisions. The good news is that there is still some opportunity for NASCOE to provide input to FSA on how operations can be tailored to meet the local needs of staff and producers.

As we move forward, members should continue to voice their concerns with their state leadership who will elevate the concerns to NASCOE. Employee and producer safety are our primary concerns followed closely by customer service. Expect to see more

updates from NASCOE on the topic of COVID-19. The upcoming year will be challenging, but it will be rewarding too. Agriculture is struggling and FSA programs will provide much needed relief to our communities. It is humbling to realize that FSA County Committees and their County Office employees are one of the engines fueling the nation as it navigates this crisis.

As impactful as this world pandemic has been, NASCOE has been busy working on other issues that are important to our members. We've had lots of positive developments over the past few months and I am excited for you to read how busy NASCOE has been on many fronts. This newsletter will include updates from the Legislative, Programs, Benefits and Membership Committees. They have worked hard on your behalf and now they are giving you a short summary of their accomplishments. Look for more updates in the future from our other committees as well. They have been just as busy working for the membership.

On a personal note, the highlight of my year so far is having the opportunity to interact with members of Congress on your behalf. Last fall, prior to the



NASCOE Newsletter

Official Publication of the National
Association of FSA County Office
Employees (NASCOE)

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funding bill's passage, Hunter Moorhead, our political consultant, and I had an opportunity to meet with the Chairman of the House Agricultural Committee (see the Legislative Committee's article in newsletter). In late winter, I also participated in a round table discussion with the House Sub-Committee on Nutrition and Forestry. The subcommittee only invited a select group of employee associations to speak on the topic of staffing resources. Each year, the Department requests substantially less money than what is needed to carry out our mission. NASCOE's message to Congress is simple, we need staffing to serve our producers and legislators should ask for the unrestricted workload data from USDA. We urge the Department to readily share that data with appropriators. We appreciate Congress for taking the time to listen to NASCOE as well as other employee associations. I've included some photos of the trip in this newsletter. Member's support of employee associations allows us to collectively advocate for our offices and producers.

This year has certainly been challenging and County Offices will continue to be busy throughout the summer. In times of stress, it's easy to focus on the negatives, but there are a lot of positives as well. FSA received a \$35 million boost in our budget, we have extra staffing coming on board, and an additional \$3 million for resources needed to administer COVID-19 relief. NASCOE has had a hand in securing all these benefits and resources. As always, we appreciate your support though membership. We absolutely could not accomplish these tasks without your help.



Legislative Subcommittee Roundtable. Back: Chairman Collin Peterson - MN-7, Marcia Fudge - OH-11, Dusty Johnson - SD, Ranking Member K. Michael Conaway - TX-11. Front: representatives from NASCOE and the National Association of Conservation Districts. Not pictured are National Association of Credit Specialists and National Association of Farmer Elected Committee representatives.

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This picture was taken in the front Secretary Perdue's office in an area affectionately known as the "Front Porch". It was formerly known as "The Cage". Left to right: David Senter, Bob Braden, and Brandon Wilson.

NASCOE participated in a House Agriculture Subcommittee round table hearing which focused on staffing and resources at USDA. Representatives of various employee associations all offered important input during the Sub Committee round table. All employee organizations were united in the belief that staffing increases are needed to process normal workload. An increase in staffing levels is even more critical with the current farm crisis.

Representatives of the National

Association of Farmer Elected Committees (NAFEC) and NASCOE made office visits to FSA management in the USDA South Building. After visits in the South Building, the group visited the Whitten Building.

National Association of Farmer Elected Committees and NASCOE representatives met with the FSA Deputy Administrator for Field Operations. NAFEC discussed the role of County Committees and presented the Deputy Administrator with a copy of the "Statutory and Regulatory Authority for County Committee Functions and Responsibilities. This booklet will soon be released to NASCOE membership as well.



L to R: Brandon Wilson, Bob Braden, Peggy Browne-DAFO, & David Senter.

Membership Workgroup - January 2020 Kansas City, Missouri



NASCOE Outreach and Advocacy Initiative



Clint Bain, Tennessee
Neil Burnette, North Carolina
Legislative Co-Chairs

The environment surrounding us today is unprecedented. The world is facing a trial that our generation has never seen. As we considered writing an article regarding the NASCOE Outreach and Advocacy Initiative, we can't help but acknowledge how agriculture groups are

coming together at this time to support one another. Our employee associations are coming together to support one another. Churches, businesses, hospitals, schools, as well as local and state government are pulling together to support one another as well. Daily communication is being sent out on every level. This just proves the point that Outreach, and Advocacy is a crucial part of everyone's life, especially now. Our question to you is, should it only be happening now, or should we be advocating and reaching out to other groups to build relationships ahead of any crucial need? "Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much" -Helen Keller. Our hope is that at the conclusion of this chaos, we start the important process of beginning to build new and meaningful relationships. NASCOE plans to promote this effort through the initial rollout of the NASCOE Outreach and Advocacy Initiative.

Outreach and Advocacy are not new terms to NASCOE. NASCOE has been advocating on your behalf since the very beginning. This newer outreach model, referenced here today, was first developed in the NASCOE Southwest Area (SWA) by the Colorado, Oklahoma, Kansas and Texas associations. The Outreach and Advocacy Initiative is a new approach for NASCOE to reach out to a broader audience, while maintaining the relationships previously established. The initiative will encourage our membership to build relationships with congressional members, congressional staff, agriculture commodity groups, as well as other federal employee associations at

the grassroots level. Stakeholders will be general farm, livestock, crop, and fruit and vegetable organizations.

The audience will vary by region, and each state association selected to participate will work with their Area Executive to establish the list of stakeholders to be targeted. Examples of such groups would include the following: Wheat Growers, Sorghum Growers, American Farm Bureau, National Farmers Union, National Cattleman's Beef Association, National Corn Growers Association, American Soybean Association, National Cotton Council, Sweet Potato Growers, etc.

The plan will initially be implemented in a few states in each area. There is no expectation that every state will be in the position to follow through with the plan due to various barriers that may not make it impractical to implement. States that are selected should have 3 to 5 capable, vetted members trained to carry out the initial contacts. Selected group members should meet prior to stakeholder meetings to practice reviewing NASCOE approved materials and topics of discussion. Meetings with all the groups should be scheduled to take place over a relatively short time frame, ideally over a couple of days. Stakeholder contact information should be readily available on the internet for States that do not already have a database of this information. State associations will be expected to fund the cost of the outreach efforts. States should consider budgeting annually for this expense. The stakeholder contacts should be targeted for the winter and early spring months when their organizations are less busy.

NASCOE has developed many tools that will be used to help state groups become comfortable with the process. Each state will have detailed slide presentations to review, conference calls to discuss ideas and ask questions, a prepared script to follow when meeting with individuals or groups and an experienced mentor assigned to each state to bridge any gaps. Each group will be well prepared before embarking on their first visits. There will also be guidance and training explaining how these

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meetings are expected to progress year after year. Your state association will be using what the SWA has learned through their efforts to make this a highly successful and rewarding experience.

Ultimately, this effort will prove very valuable to not only NASCOE and its membership, but the participating members will find the process rewarding and energizing. Each participant will be more connected than ever to their occupational mission and develop relationships and skills that they will carry forward throughout their career and beyond. Are you ready to step up to the challenge? If so, look for upcoming opportunities from your state association to express your interest in becoming a part of the NASCOE Outreach and Advocacy Initiative.

Legislative Accomplishment Spotlight

NASCOE is working on your behalf every day. The Legislative team is only one facet of a larger group effort to benefit NASCOE membership. Even as we work on many issues that gain positive results; we would like to focus on just one of the accomplishments that the Legislative team and NASCOE membership has recently achieved for all the membership.

Last December, Congress passed the Further Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2020. At a time when many agency budgets were cut, the FSA FY 2020 appropriation was increased by \$39 million above the FY 2019 level. In addition, it also included \$35 million specifically for the hiring of county office staff and farm loan officers to address staffing shortages across the country. This funding is available through September 30, 2021 so the agency will have ample time to utilize the funds. As a result, the Department has been busy assessing county office workload across the nation and will likely hire in excess of 600 additional employees at FSA by year end.

It is important to note that this achievement could not have been realized without the work of several team members. Hunter Moorhead, NASCOE Legislative Consultant, was instrumental in utilizing his relationships to secure the above-mentioned funding. Your PAC contributions were also a vital part of the overall effort. Those contributions play a key role in assisting Hunter with the legislative relationship building process. Last fall, NASCOE President, Brandon Wilson and Hunter personally met with House Ag Committee Chairman, Collin Peterson to advocate on our behalf for this funding as well. NASCOE also recognizes that several of our members who work in county offices have worked with the legislative team and reached out to their members of Congress to build meaningful relationships that also supported our effort. Above all, your support of NASCOE through membership allows us to work on your behalf day in and day out.



"I met with Brandon Wilson, the President-Elect of the National Association of FSA County Office Employees (NASCOE), to discuss the situation in local FSA field offices. FSA county office employees are the front line in delivering farm bill programs and trade aid and disaster assistance programs. These folks have always been able to deliver, but our county office system is at a breaking point with retirements, potential retirements, the lack of adequate training on new programs, and the pace at hiring new employees. With the farm bill over, we need to get back to conducting oversight to ensure that we have a fully staffed and adequately trained FSA field office staff, especially given the stressful times in farm country and the need for the economic lifeline that FSA helps provide"

-- Collin Peterson (D) MN-7, Chairman, House Ag Committee

Member Support Brings Membership Strength



**Glenn Thomas, South Carolina
NASCOE Membership Chair**

NASCOE has been very busy this year and the membership committee has been no exception! This past January, the NASCOE Membership Work Group met to formulate a plan to effectively recruit and retain FSA County Office employees to become NASCOE members. The plan also included elements for enhancing our organizational

processes to better meet the needs of all County Office employees. The work group was a mix of Officers, National Committee Chairpersons, Area Membership Chairpersons and new co-workers (one from each area). Everyone was very excited to have our newest members in the group as they provided valuable input, a fresh perspective and many great ideas and suggestions on charting a path forward to attract new members to NASCOE.

With the additional funds provided by Congress to implement the 2018 Farm Bill, many states are seeing an influx of new hires. This is a welcome change, as we have watched our county office staff numbers decrease over the past several years. We have also seen a decrease in the number of NASCOE members as many long-time members retired and their positions were not back filled. As our new co-workers come on-board, it is important that we take the time to inform them about NASCOE and all the valuable work we do on employee's behalf.

Along with the new hires, we also have many co-workers who are not currently NASCOE members. The membership committee has been tasked with ensuring that all current non-members and new hires are contacted personally. They should be provided information about NASCOE along with membership material to ensure they can make an informed decision to join NASCOE. As an incentive to join NASCOE, our emblems provider, Superior, is

providing a promotional \$25 gift card to any new member that has joined since January 1, 2020. As a current member, you are NASCOE's best advocate in recruiting new members. I would encourage you to promote this incentive and share your reasons for joining NASCOE with anyone who is not yet a member.

The membership committee is hard at work with state membership chairpersons to update the NASCOE Information Database (NID). This database houses contact information for all county office employees. We are working diligently to obtain and update personal e-mail accounts and mobile numbers so that we will be able to quickly inform you about items of interest and what NASCOE is doing for you, much as we did during the furlough period. Be sure to verify with your state association that your contact information is correct, especially if you have not been receiving updates.

As you can see from the reports in this newsletter, which were submitted by your NASCOE officers and committee chairs, NASCOE is a strong advocate for its membership. NASCOE will continue to be a strong voice as we move forward, advocating on your behalf to secure good working conditions and the necessary resources to provide excellent customer service. It is important to point out that an association is only as good as its membership is strong. Each member of NASCOE has a stake in the future of the county office system and none of NASCOE's successes could have been accomplished without the support of members. If you are not a member, please take time to consider joining because we need your help now more than ever. To learn more about membership in NASCOE contact your local State Association representative or visit the NASCOE website at <https://nascoe.org/>. Click on the membership tab.

NEA Chair: [Tina Williams, VT](#)

NWA Chair: [Evan Guler, ND](#)

MWA Chair: [LeAnn Oltmanns, IL](#)

SEA Chair: [Chiquita McDowell, VA](#)

SWA Chair: [Angie Bierman, OK](#)

NASCOE BY THE NUMBERS

2003-04

9,329

COF Employees Nationwide

7,697

CO NASCOE Members

Membership

82.5%

2008-09

8,651

COF Employees Nationwide

7,179

CO NASCOE Members

Membership

83.0%

2013-14

6,944

COF Employees Nationwide

5,694

CO NASCOE Members

Membership

82.0%

2018-19

6,632

COF Employees Nationwide

5,343

CO NASCOE Members

Membership

80.6%

2019-20

6,785

COF Employees Nationwide

5,223

CO NASCOE Members

Membership

77.0%

-2,544 employees from 2003
to 2020

+153 employees from 2019

-120 members from 2019

Talk to your co-workers about
NASCOE! Need help? Contact
your Area Membership Chair!

Advocating Field Employee Suggestions



**Christopher Hare, Indiana
NASCOE Programs Chair**

Hello NASCOE members from your NASCOE Programs Committee Chair, Chris Hare. Recently, President Brandon Wilson, Vice President Marcinda Kester and myself were at the Department for face to face introductions and meetings to discuss

resolutions to the many program issues that YOU, the membership, have provided the Programs Committee to resolve.

This meeting was my first face to face meeting with the National Office as your Programs Committee Chairperson. We brought over 40 submissions to discuss or follow up with responses our submitters received. To date, the NASCOE Programs Committee has received over 105 program submissions since July 1, 2019. The NASCOE programs submission page is used by members, Farm Program and Farm Loan Program employees, and even State Office employees.

While in D.C. I met with the following Sections:

- DAFO
- DAFP
- Conservation Division managers
- Price Support Division managers
- Safety Net Division managers
- Production Delivery Division leadership

One thing that became very clear from this trip, is that while NASCOE is working hard for you, the National Office is also working hard for you. NASCOE was listened to, respected, and conversations with each section were very positive. Not one submission I presented was frowned upon. The National Office truly is one of NASCOE's biggest supporters. Although we may not see it, they see us **"getting the job done"** and they

couldn't be prouder.

Often, program ideas which are submitted are well received by the National Office; however, due to budget restraints, they cannot be implemented. On a positive note, I was informed that the budget has been received for software upgrades, and it is "better than expected". To those submitters who I responded back to by saying "the national office will put it on the list for future enhancements, until budget allows us", although not guaranteed, we might be able to see your suggestions implemented over the next year or two.

We also discussed the Fellowship Program where PT's and CED's can work on a short work detail in WDC. The national program managers encouraged ALL eligible employees to review the annual AO Notice when it is released and apply. This eight-week detail to work in Washington D.C. could mean a permanent placement in the future for some. The National Office sees the value and talent we have out in the field offices and they want to add that value and experience to their staff in D.C.

I also pointed out to the National Office that counties see the value of the Reverse Fellowship Program. This program is just how it sounds. National Office employees are detailed out to spend time and work in county offices. I have received many positive comments from counties who have hosted employees from the National Office through the Reverse Fellowship Program.

A few highlights from this trip were:

- The National Office supports the NASCOE Programs Committee and all the submissions they received and/or we discussed. I solicited and received suggestions from the National Office how to make this process better on their end. I will be adding additional information to the Programs Submission website with such items as:
 - The exact request or outcome the submitter

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is wanting.

- Adding a “business need date”. When should this suggestion be implemented?
- What is the actual time savings per week would a submission accomplish?
- The National Office wants to remind all employees that the “Tell Sonny” and “Ask FSA” are public domains and are for public use. Employees should not be using these public websites or social media for clarification on policy or program questions. They should ask through their STO or NASCOE
- “Ready Talk” was discussed in every meeting we attended. There are both positives and negatives with the Ready Talk platform. A strong positive for Ready Talk, is that it is a great way for the County Office to hear program policy directly from the National Office. This ensures that the County Office received the full message or training. No miscommunication or watering down of information. Everyone is hearing the same information at once. A negative for Ready Talk is that the power points have not been distributed prior to the national conference calls. The national office will try where possible to distribute training materials to the field before these trainings. This can be difficult because at times, the materials change shortly before the training.
- The National Office has asked NASCOE Programs Committee Chair to put together a group to look at the Ready Talk platform and brainstorm ideas how we can utilize and disseminate information such as power points and the Q & A’s while still following the chain of command. It has been brought to NASCOE’s attention, that many STO’s are not relaying information from national conference calls to the County Office.
- While visiting with the Price Support Division, I made a note that I wanted to remind everyone to promote the Farm Storage Facility Loan (FSFL) program along with Marketing Assistance Loans (MAL’s) when the opportunity presents itself. These truly are great programs available to producers to help with their operations.
- Social media should not replace policy and procedure found in FSA handbooks. We need to make sure employees are following guidance in the appropriate handbooks, rather than social media. I personally (along with national office employees) have seen some great tools and ideas shared on social media. My suggestion to anyone who has created a tool to make service to our producers more efficient, send them in to the National Office the NASCOE programs page on the NASCOE website. We can look them over and even send them to the national office to get their thoughts and even approval to share them with everyone.

I plan to work with Teresa Holmquist, NASCOE Publicity Chair to load this year’s program suggestions to the nascoe.org webpage. In the future, these suggestions will be loaded as soon as answers are provided from D.C. There are good submissions and responses everyone should read. Our program delivery affects everyone.

I look forward to hearing suggestions from COF employees, and building and maintaining relationships between the County Office and National Office. For more information about the programs committee or submitting a program suggestion, please visit the programs tab located on the nascoe.org website.

I’d like to close by thanking the National Office for giving NASCOE the opportunity to visit with DAFO and DAFP. I’d also like to thank YOU, the membership, for your support.

PRO TIP

Do you have an idea to improve an FSA Program Process?

Share your idea at:

<https://nascoe.org/programs/programs-submission/>



National Association of FSA County Office Employees

**QUESTIONS?
CALL
866.955.FEDS**

Coverage:

Professional Liability Insurance

NASCOE strongly recommends that members consider the risks associated with job duties and the benefits of FEDS Protection.

You could find yourself in a situation where you need to hire your own personal attorney - just for doing your job. FEDS Federal Employee Professional Liability Insurance provides you with the same affordable legal representation and indemnity protection, as federal employees, to protect you and your family from the risks and financial consequences of a claim or allegation made against you in the performance of your federal job duties, including:

- Loan work
- Tough cases, especially those drawing internal or external scrutiny
- Environmental evaluations
- Suits by anti-livestock and other environmental groups
- Supervision of employees

NASCOE Member Pricing for FEDS Protection:

\$1,000,000 annual policy for \$280 + taxes & fees
\$2,000,000 annual policy for \$380 + taxes & fees

**For NASCOE
Discount Code:
Contact: Chris Lary
benefitschair@gmail.com**



Enrollment takes 5 minutes:

Call 866.955.FEDS
or enroll online at
www.fedsprotection.com

Administrative & Disciplinary

Matters For administrative matters, your FEDS policy will pay for legal defense (up to \$200,000) to defend the allegations, prepare you for the agency administrative or investigation process, attend the investigative interview with you, and defend you in any resulting disciplinary action at both the agency level and at the MSPB.

Civil Suits

If you are sued, your FEDS attorney will defend you in a personal capacity lawsuit when DOJ exercises its discretion not to. The policy will also provide indemnification if you are held liable. Defense and indemnification limits are either \$1,000,000 or \$2,000,000 depending on the policy you choose.

Criminal Investigations

If you are the subject of a criminal investigation, FEDS will pay for legal defense up to \$100,000 into any act, error or omission while rendering within the scope of employment. The most common criminal investigations involving FSA employees are due to conflict of interest statutes where intent is not a prerequisite to prove the crime, misappropriation of federal funds, release of privacy act or other statutorily protected information, and/or an allegation of misuse or abuse of position or authority.

FEDS is a U.S. based, veteran-owned company with benefits secured by a U.S. based A+XV (Superior) Rated Insurance Company

Your Benefits Team in Action

Your Benefits/Emblems Team has been hard at work this year securing new benefits for you. I am happy to report this year we have the following NEW benefits:



- Live Streaming Fitness - LiveStreamingFitness.com is an on-line healthy lifestyle platform that includes live streaming and on demand fitness, nutrition and cooking shows available 24/7 in a safe and interactive community of professionals and individuals promoting the best version of a healthy you. <https://livestreamingfitness.com/>
- Emblems by Superior – The official provider of USDA apparel is now offering us monthly specials. 15% of all sales are going to our Scholarship Fund. From August 2018 – August 2019 that 15% totaled \$10,801.19.
- Emblems by Superior – they have on their own offered to new, full NASCOE members a \$25 gift card to be used at their online store. This offering can be a big help for existing members to help recruit new members when they come on board.

If you are wanting more information about these benefits, or all the other great benefits NASCOE has to offer, please go to <https://nascoe.org/benefits/>

Spotlight: Professional Liability Insurance

Federal Employee Defense Services (FEDS) provides Professional Liability Insurance for supervisors. CED's and Program Technicians-In-Charge are considered supervisor positions by the agency, and therefore, are eligible for reimbursement of 50 percent the annual cost of professional liability insurance premium cost.

As supervisors, your judgement calls will be scrutinized with 20/20 hindsight. Whether you are on the front lines of a crisis or you are providing other essential services, products, oversight or protection, you will be examined. As part of your duties, you will make decisions, take actions, take inaction, devise telework directives, etc. These choices will come under scrutiny when finger pointing and calls for accountability begin. This is especially true as County Office managers make decisions related to new programs that are rushed to be implemented or decisions related to COVID-19. FEDS have defended your coworkers in the past and they will now be here for County Office managers as well.



Applying is easy, simply go to <https://www.fedsprotection.com/>. NASCOE members can receive a promotional code to receive a discount on this product. Instructions for members on how to receive the code are on the NASCOE Website Benefits page.

Additional NASCOE Benefits Include:

Dillard Financial Solutions

dillardfinancialsolutionsinc.com/nascoe/benefits/
email: nascoe@dillardfinancial.com

Working Advantage Employee Discount Program

<http://www.WorkingAdvantage.com>

To learn more, visit www.nascoe.org/benefits/

NASCOE Candidacy Announcements Due May 30, 2020

NASCOE Secretary, Richard Csutoras reminds members that NASCOE will post to the NASCOE Website announcements of persons desiring to run for any NASCOE office. In order to be published on the NASCOE website, announcements must be received by the Secretary no later than May 30 of the applicable year.

All announcements will be posted at the same time as soon after June 1 as practical. In no way is this to be construed that announcements must be publicized in this manner as candidates may, if they so desire, initiate their own mailing.

**Please transmit any Candidacy Announcements to NASCOE Secretary, Richard Csutoras at: rick.csutoras@gmail.com
Announcements must be received no later than
May 30, 2020.**

If no announcement for an Officer, Area Executive or Alternate Area Executive is received by May 30, a statement will be placed on the NASCOE Website that no candidates have announced at this time for the respective position(s).

Neither the NASCOE newsletter nor area bulletins are to be used for announcements of candidates. It is the responsibility of the candidate to ensure that the announcement has been correctly posted.