



## National Association of FSA County Office Employees

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On January 9, 2012, Secretary Vilsack announced USDA's "Blueprint for Stronger Service" to increase efficiency in USDA operations. This plan is intended to help producers drive America's economy by streamlining operations and cutting costs in USDA. The "Blueprint for Stronger Service" is based on a Department-wide review of operations, from the headquarters to the field offices. The end result of this review is supposed to create optimal use of USDA employees, better results for customers, and greater efficiencies for American taxpayers.

Under this plan, USDA will close 259 domestic offices, of which 131 are county Farm Service Agency (FSA) offices. USDA claims it can find significant savings by consolidating these offices while ensuring vital services are not cut. They also claim that technology improvements, advanced service centers, and broadband service have reduced the need for brick and mortar facilities.

The National Association of FSA County Office Employees (NASCOE) recognizes and understands the need for USDA to review its operations and look for ways to become more efficient. Under the "Blueprint for Stronger Service," it appears USDA did not complete the comprehensive review of its operations. It appears USDA took a piecemeal approach and allowed given agencies to make recommendations on their structure without considering the effects an office closure will have on the services it provides in a given location.

NASCOE has concerns with the "Blueprint for Stronger Service," and the following are some concerns that we feel need to be addressed:

- The plan calls for closing 131 FSA field offices but only closing 24 Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) offices throughout the Nation. More than 2100 FSA and 2800 NRCS field offices will remain open. The plan indicates by making these changes, it will improve customer service. FSA is proportionally closing a significantly larger number of offices when compared to its sister agencies. If a producer now has to drive to two different offices to complete their business, we do not believe that service will be improving. All USDA agencies located in the given office should be evaluated when making a determination to close an office. Congress needs to identify what services they want a properly functioning USDA field office to provide so USDA can properly structure its field offices.

- The plan does not address efficiencies that could be realized above the field offices. Over the past years, FSA has reduced the number of field office staff and the number of field offices for budgetary reasons. With a smaller workforce in the field and less field offices, NASCOE questions why the FSA has not reduced, consolidated or eliminated operational levels above the field offices. Offices above the field level could be consolidated to provide savings that should be used to fund additional staff in the field to better service your constituents.

•The plan indicates that improved technology and advanced service centers have reduced the need for bricks and mortar when, in fact, technology at the service centers is still far behind the private sector. Producers still rely heavily on the staff in these offices to help them understand the complex programs that are available to them.

•Stakeholder groups, agricultural producer and rancher organizations, local elected officials, etc. should have been given the opportunity for input on the front-end of the decision process, not just an opportunity to defend offices that have been arbitrarily designated for closure. This did not occur.

NASCOE understands that the national deficit needs to be addressed, but we strongly recommend that USDA take a comprehensive look at all levels of the Department, starting at the top and working its way down. NASCOE is in support of a top/down approach that addresses all inefficiencies within the Department and its Agencies. This includes Washington, D.C., Kansas City, Salt Lake City, St. Louis, state and district offices.

We ask that you make contact with USDA and ask that any plan to reduce the number of county offices be put on hold until a complete top/down approach be taken to identify possible savings. This approach will provide savings so offices that your constituents use can remain open and viable.

Sincerely,

*John R. Lohr*

John R. Lohr,  
NASCOE President