

The 2009 Legislative session proved to be informative and as always, a nice change of pace. I felt the theme of the session was; what can Farm Service Agency do for you and not what can you give us. On Tuesday, the entire group of NASCOE representatives attended a meeting with the national officers and Robert Redding, NASCOE'S legislative consultant. On Wednesday Susan Allen, Morgan Thornburg, and I (Joyce Schmitt) met with the legislative staffers from the offices of Senator Lugar, Congressmen Visclosky, Donnelly and Ellsworth. Unfortunately we did not get to meet with any of the Legislators personally, but their staffers were receptive to our NASCOE message. When I returned home, I found e-mail messages from Senator Lugar and Congressman Ellsworth's aides. Putting those NASCOE business cards in the folder really does work!

There are several agencies within USDA and many of those agencies duplicate program delivery. The legislative talking points stressed that Farm Service Agency would like to streamline those duplications. An area that could save taxpayer dollars and expedite programs for producers is allowing FSA to handle administration of Conservation Programs. We explained to the legislators that FSA being the administrator of programs would be more efficient, cost effective, and allow better customer service. Personally Identifiable Information is placed at risk as we are not allowed to share certain information with NRCS and they must duplicate forms for producers (e.g. Direct Deposit forms). It was found that in a report from the Ag Sub Committee FSA has been able to deliver conservation programs with an administrative cost of 6.2% as compared to 24.2 % of the conservation allocation used by NRCS. The savings could be dollars used for conservation implementation for producers. Computer software packages (e.g. toolkit and Arc Map) could be trimmed 2 to 1. Contracts for different equipment would be eliminated with a migration of computer systems to one system. We stressed to the legislators that NRCS should continue as our technical service provider.

Producers currently report their crop planting to FSA, RMA, and NASS. Audits of programs have indicated that FSA involvement would save money by coordinating data ( crop report, yield information), and on-site crop inspections. GAO audits have often recommended that FSA be given the responsibility of claims processing, therefore reducing erroneous payments and government outlays. Our message to the legislators was that it would benefit USDA and taxpayers if producers could report to FSA and we would then share that information with the other agencies through a common data base.

Animal ID is an area that NASCOE felt FSA involvement would make sense. Our message was that FSA already has the proper infrastructure to handle an Animal ID program. Producers report their crops to us and are familiar with our offices. We have a local presence unlike any other government agency. We have the GIS mapping system in place and to add a layer to identify livestock operations would make sense. Another point is that now the information rapidly goes stale in the hands of private groups that do not have the constant interaction with producers at the local level. Our agency is regularly making reported changes to farming operations. It could be financially devastating to the livestock industry to be unable to track the source of disease. A great example of this is the current problem with the peanut and tomato industry. The inability to trace the origin of the disease outbreak has caused severe financial loss. If USDA were to establish an official program we stressed that we would be the agency to handle it.

While there are no pending bills at this time, both crop insurance and the ID/tracking issues are on schedule to have hearings in the house Ag committee. So, the discussion of these issues was welcomed by the offices we visited.

Lastly we discussed employee benefits. We did not ask for more but for legislation to tweak what we have. Unused sick leave at retirement for FERS employees was first on the list. The legislative staff understood what we were talking about because this affects them as well. We asked that the legislators consider supporting House bill 958 over HR 1263. The two bills mirror one another but the latter requires employees to contribute 3% to TSP funds. Employees should be allowed to make their own choice. The increase in age of eligible dependent healthcare was an issue. NASCOE would like to see the age increased from 22 to 25 for dependent children that remain in school. Self plus one was another healthcare issue. The healthcare plans now only allow for "Self" or "Self and Family". NASCOE feels cost savings would be generated in the insurance program by allowing this. Whistleblower protection and changing retirement calculation from high 3 to high 5 were other issues discussed.

In discussions with legislative teams from other states, we came across some ideas for possible implementation for future conferences. One suggestion is to obtain legislative position papers for all Indiana Congressional and Senate offices. In the event that there is a small delegation from Indiana and it is not possible to meet with each office, we could at a minimum visit each office and leave our contact information and position papers for review. Additionally, it was noted that IASCOE board may want to discuss ways to entice new IASCOE members to get involved with the legislative process. Washington D.C. is a lovely and exciting city to visit.

Susan, Morgan, and I thank each of you for giving us the opportunity to represent, you, the members of IASCOE at the legislative conference. It is both an honor and a pleasure to see the legislative process in action. Please do not hesitate to contact any of us if you have questions regarding our visits with the Congressional representatives.

Respectfully submitted,  
Joyce Schmitt