



December 19, 2014

# NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF FSA SUPPORT EMPLOYEES

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## MESSAGE FROM YOUR PRESIDENT

NASE strives to:

- promote the betterment of the Farm Service Agency through improved service to the public
- Improve our programs
- Establish a cooperative relationship at all levels of the Agency
- Help accomplish the mission of USDA and FSA
- Improve support staff effectiveness
- Improve morale, esprit-de-corp, and efficiency
- Promote self-motivation, self-education, and career enhancement
- Promote the social, economic, civic and personal welfare of support employees



Wear **red** on Fridays to show support for our troops at home and abroad.

Almost a full week has come and gone from when I started this newsletter, I just do not know where the time goes. I know I for one have been a little busy lately. I hear that line from the field all the time and can truly sympathize with each of you. Between staff vacancies and vacations, new farm programs and new farm loan rules, staffing, budgets, trainings, more trainings, everyone trying to get to a point where they can take a few days off and pushing more up the line, I am frazzled beyond belief.

I do not by any means think my situation is any different than what many of you are experiencing and again, I can truly sympathize with you.

Earlier this week at my little granddaughter's 1<sup>st</sup> birthday party I was amongst a group of Salvation Army bell ringers and volunteers. (I have to say little granddaughter as the only other one I have is going on 25 years old.) This particular group of people (the Salvation Army Corp as a whole) is a very giving bunch of people and their bell ringing time of the year gets pretty chaotic for about five to six weeks each year. They are, at this point in the season, anxiously waiting for the Christmas season to be over, just so they can breathe a little more freely. I remembered a time when we had a busy season and a slower season. Unfortunately, there is no more "slower season". It has been one steady rush now for several years.

We now have a budget, the farm bill farm programs and training on the programs in in full swing, farm loan has a few new rules and lots of additional money for more staffing and, as our SED said at a staff meeting this week, a new round of "busy" begins.

PLEASE, each of you, take a minute for yourselves during the busy times. Whether it is an evening by yourself or with your spouse, an afternoon at the spa, an hour quietly reading something other than rules and regulations, or even a few minutes to walk around the block and clear your mind, PLEASE take time for your own well-being. As a mom I realized that there is no time for "us" to be off our game. And as the commercial on TV these days says, "Moms and Dads just don't get sick days", so please take care of yourselves to avoid physical as well as mental illnesses. We, your family and FSA, need you but we need you happy and healthy!

Thank you for allowing me to serve as President for 2014-2015.

Marilyn Jo McMullen  
PO Box 1774, Bozeman, MT 59771-1774  
406-599-8181 (cell)

[mjomcmullen@aol.com](mailto:mjomcmullen@aol.com) or [marilyn.mcmullen@mt.usda.gov](mailto:marilyn.mcmullen@mt.usda.gov)

May your Holidays be bright and merry! Whatever your religious beliefs, or not, I wish for you the best for this holiday season and new year. Wow! 2015 coming up fast!

**2014-2015 NASE Board**

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**2015 Budget Issues – December 19, 2014, Message from Greg Diehouse, Deputy Administrator of Operations to State Executive Directors and Administrative Officers:**

“National headquarters staff are actively studying the funding levels and provisions included in the recent FY 2015 omnibus spending bill. I am heartened to note that funding levels promise to allow our agency to maintain its service delivery staffing and office structure while addressing some of our critical hiring, training, outreach, and succession planning needs. Stay tuned for more information and announcements coming early in the calendar year.

We are also looking closely at the language provisions that Congress inserted into the bill and its accompanying explanatory note. Here, we need to be especially cognizant of the restrictions placed on permanently relocating employees - specifically, the Congressional provision in the statute reads that *“none of the funds available to the Farm Service Agency shall be used to permanently relocate county based employees that would result in an office with two or fewer employees without prior notification and approval of the Committees on Appropriations.”*

Because this language is ambiguous and potentially written to be broader than Congress intended, we are actively meeting with our budget staff and counsel to define “relocation” and determine how much flexibility we have within the confines of the statute. However, until I am able to provide you with further clarification, the following temporary restrictions are in place: all hiring (selecting) officials shall not a.) make selections from federal merit promotion or county internal certificates, b.) effect change in duty stations, c.) approve voluntary permanent reassignments or d.) issue directed permanent reassignments of any farm service agency county based employee that would result in an office staffed with two or fewer permanent employees.

These temporary restrictions include all pending selections for all state and county office positions. Hiring actions that result in offices with 3 or more permanent employees are permitted as long as all our employees are treated fairly in the process. I realize that these restrictions will negatively affect a great many hiring actions that are in place across the nation, and therefore suggest that State Executive Directors and their Administrative Officers work with our Human Resources Division to request time extensions for pending merit promotion and hiring certificates while we finalize a hiring policy that adheres to these restrictions.

More to come...”

**FROM: WebTA/ARS Hints and Reminders:**

Please see the attached excerpt from 21-AO Amend 7 (dated 6/20/2014), page 2-12, paragraph 24 C National Office Authorization for Generic Activity Codes, which authorizes and instructs employees to use the activity of ‘NOAUTH-A5’ to report activities performed for ‘Receipt of Service’.

The program to be used in conjunction with ‘NOAUTH-A5’ would be the program specific to the task(s) related to completing the Receipt for Service.

## Employee Viewpoint Survey and Request for Association Representation

### OPPORTUNITY TO STEP UP

*The results of the 2014 Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS) are in from OPM, in addition FSA also has results for the parallel County Employee Viewpoint Survey (CEVS) that was conducted by the Agency. DAFO has named Oscar Gonzales, SED in California and Craig McCain, SED in Louisiana to lead an effort to review the results and trend analysis of the surveys to develop potential actions and strategies that can address identified employee concerns. The desire is to produce a concise and clear action plan with realistic steps that can be implemented that will have the potential of improving our employee's views and opinions and foster improved employee engagement.*

*This communications is to solicit from each of the employee associations a representative to provide input on the development of the action plan. Employee's perspectives and input on potential actions will greatly assist in this important initiative as listening to our employees and addressing their needs can have a significant impact on the success and sustainability of the agency.*

*It is anticipated that the representatives will conduct much of their work during several conference calls over the next couple of months. Once the representatives have been submitted they will be contacted to set up a specific schedule for meetings.*

*If you are a NASE member and are interested in participating in the development of the action plan, please send me the following information IMMEDIATELY:*

- *Name*
- *Title*
- *Office location*
- *Phone number*
- *Email address*

## Pay and Benefits Watch

### [Disengaged Employees, Lackluster Pay and More](#)

It looks like 2014 will end with a whimper instead of a bang for federal employees, and that's good news, considering what the bang might have been. Despite some 11<sup>th</sup>-hour brinksmanship, lawmakers approved and President Obama signed a \$1.1 trillion spending plan for 2015. That means you can stop worrying about potential furloughs or a government shutdown before next fall, unless you work for Homeland Security, in which case you still have a reprieve until late February.

The law allows for a **1 percent pay raise for federal employees and military personnel**. While that's probably not going to make anyone break out the champagne, it's certainly better than the three-year pay freeze feds experienced prior to the 1 percent raise they got in 2014.

The only folks who won't see a pay increase are top political appointees and Vice President Biden. Lawmakers also froze their own salaries, so there's some consolation in the fact that they didn't reward themselves for an historically unproductive year.

[Read full article »](#)

## New Employee Task Force update

During our November 18, 2014, conference all, we discussed scheduling a call for December 9, or December 16. Given the upcoming holidays, and the fact that many will be taking use or loose leave, we decided it would be best to simply regroup after the first of the year. The National Office team members will be working to have a more detailed project plan/proposal for our January 21, 2015, meeting.

Teresa Martin and I attended an FLP farm Bill Training Meeting last week and presented our draft proposal for the “Employee Resource Center” that will consolidate the training resources currently available, as well as incorporate any new opportunities that are developed. The proposal was well received, and States are anxious to have this available given the anticipation that States will be able to begin the hiring process for a significant number of employees.

In the interim, please continue to consider how FSA should/could utilize the resources USDA has made available for the onboarding process. Also, continue to think about area where States will need to ability to customize training resources to meet their individual needs. Lastly please be prepared to share your thoughts regarding priorities and “quick hits” that can be realistically completed in time to be used with the onboarding and training of new employees as states begin filling current vacancies.

## Mandatory FY-2015 USDA Information Security Awareness Training due 12/31/2014

**Reminder: The FSA Information Security Office needs EVERY FSA employee and contractor to complete the mandatory Fiscal Year (FY) 2015 USDA Information Security Awareness (ISA) Training per the attached IRM Notice 465.** All currently onboard FSA personnel (including state and county committee members), shall complete the FY-2015 ISA training and assessment no later than the close of business (COB) **Wednesday, December 31, 2014**, whether or not they use USDA computers.

**Training completion is required by Federal Law—the Federal Information Security Management Act (FISMA), USDA and FSA regulations, and Office of Management and Budget (OMB) guidance.** The percentage of FSA employees completing the training is monitored by the USDA Office of the Chief Information Officer (OCIO) and will be audited by the USDA Office of the Inspector General (OIG).

**If you are one of the FSA personnel who have not taken this training yet, please do so by the deadline of COB Wednesday, December 31, 2014. Otherwise, noncompliant users’ Local Area Network (LAN) accounts may be suspended until their training is completed. Your timely action is crucial to the success of this effort.**

## USDA seeks public comment on new EQIP rule

**WASHINGTON, Dec. 11, 2014** –The U.S. Department of Agriculture is publishing a rule that outlines how it will improve the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), one of USDA’s largest conservation programs. The interim final rule includes program changes authorized by Congress in the 2014 Farm Bill.

USDA has established a 60-day comment period for the rule. The rule is expected to be available in the Federal Register and regulations.gov on Friday, Dec. 12. Beginning Friday, public comments can be submitted through regulations.gov or by mailing them. Comments are due by Feb. 10, 2015. Full details are in the Federal Register notice.

“This interim final rule provides a roadmap to help streamline and simplify EQIP for farmers and ranchers,” Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack said. “We strongly encourage agricultural producers, private forest landowners and stakeholders to provide comments on our implementation processes. This feedback will help us improve our operation and deliver technical and financial assistance more efficiently to our nation’s agricultural producers and forest landowners.”

The changes are intended to simplify the EQIP regulation regarding conservation practice scheduling, payment limitations and other administrative actions. Vilsack said USDA has enhanced EQIP by streamlining the delivery of technical and financial assistance to agricultural producers and forest landowners, nationwide.

Highlights of program changes in this rule include the following:

- Requires at least 5 percent of available EQIP funds be targeted for conservation practices that promote wildlife habitat;
- Establishes EQIP as a contributing program for the Regional Conservation Partnership Program;
- Increases the advanced payment from 30 percent to 50 percent for eligible historically underserved producers, including beginning farmers, to help purchase material or contract services;
- Targets assistance to veteran farmers and ranchers including eligibility for the new 50 percent advance payment and up to 90 percent of the cost to implement EQIP conservation practices;
- Increases the payment limitation for EQIP from \$300,000 to a maximum of \$450,000 for benefits received during 2014-2018 and removes the option for a waiver to exceed payment limitations;
- Eliminates the requirement for a program contract to remain in place for one year after the last practice has been implemented, allowing practices to be scheduled through the tenth year of a contract;
- Includes an option to waive the irrigation history requirement under certain conditions;
- Incorporates the Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program functions into EQIP.

For more information about interim final rules for USDA NRCS’s Farm Bill conservation programs, visit [EQIP Rule Page](#).

For more information on technical and financial assistance available through EQIP, visit the [EQIP Web page](#).