

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

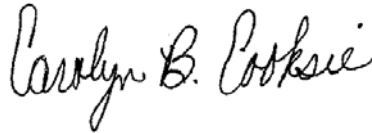
Farm Service Agency
Washington, DC 20250

Notice AO-1524

For: FSA Employees

Guidelines on Providing Assistance to Customers

Approved by: Acting Administrator



1 Overview

A Background

FSA is actively participating in USDA Civil Rights Assessment planning meetings with Departmental officials and other USDA Agencies. As a result of the Civil Rights Assessment, several priority recommendations are being analyzed and discussed.

In part, and as a result of some of the recommendations, FSA is clarifying the assistance employees may provide to customers and potential customers in connection with completing applications.

B Purpose

This notice:

- reminds FSA employees of FSA's cultural transformation, mission, and strategic plan
- clarifies how FSA employees can assist all producers and customers
- identifies some things that employees should avoid.

Disposal Date	Distribution
October 1, 2012	All FSA Employees; State Offices relay to County Offices

2 FSA's Cultural Transformation, Mission, and Strategic Plan

A Cultural Transformation Initiative

Secretary Vilsack has implemented, "Cultural Transformation" across all USDA. FSA's senior leadership is responsible for supporting Cultural Transformation. One goal of the Cultural Transformation initiative is to foster equal and fair treatment of all customers by increased community outreach and continuous examination and improvement of customer service.

Each FSA employee plays a significant role in creating a diverse, inclusive, and high performance organization, by committing to take the extra step to support colleagues, remaining mindful of our customers and stakeholders, embracing opportunities to learn, and ensuring that we consistently deliver the best of ourselves and expertise each and every day.

Cultural Transformation is a process of creating a workplace where all employees and customers are treated with dignity and respect.

B FSA Mission

FSA's mission is to equitably serve all farmers, ranchers, and agricultural partners through the delivery of effective, efficient agricultural programs for all Americans. FSA is a customer-driven Agency with a diverse and multi-talented workforce, dedicated to achieving an economically and environmentally sound future for American agriculture.

The foundation of FSA's mission and vision rests on the USDA's long-standing core values of all the following:

- strong ethics
- customer service
- team work
- inclusive decisionmaking
- fiscal responsibility.

2 FSA's Cultural Transformation, Mission, and Strategic Plan (Continued)

C FSA's Strategic Plan

The primary goals of FSA's strategic plan are to:

- support productive farms and ranches
- support secure and affordable food and fiber
- conserve natural resources and enhance the environment.

To achieve strategic goals and objectives, FSA implemented a set of crosscutting management objectives to better align internal capabilities with Agency responsibilities, mission, vision, strategic goals, and objectives. Internal and external stakeholders identified the following areas as most critical during FSA's discussion sessions:

- ensuring civil rights
- strategically managing human capital
- improving strategic accountability
- improving business process effectiveness
- improving stakeholder satisfaction.

FSA developed crosscutting management objectives with performance measures designed to ensure the success of initiatives. The objectives hold senior managers and employees accountable for achieving key results tied to the FY 2005 through 2011 Strategic Plan, as well as day-to-day program management and administration. The performance measures under each management objective will link all FSA employees, including employees in administrative or support functions, directly to the strategic plan. The objectives will then be combined with other assessments to determine the success of FSA programs.

Civil rights are incorporated into all aspects of FSA's programs to ensure equitable delivery of programs and services and equitable treatment of FSA's customers, the Nation's farmers, ranchers, and agricultural producers. Civil rights is also a key initiative in FSA employment practices to provide a workplace free of discrimination to enhance the diversity of the workforce through affirmative step to recruit, hire, train, and promote employees from diverse backgrounds. This 2-pronged strategy aims to ensure civil rights in both the delivery of FSA programs and the diverse make-up of employees who deliver these programs.

A copy of FSA's Strategic Plan for 2005 through 2011 is at http://www.fsa.usda.gov/Internet/FSA_File/fsa-strategicplanfy2005-2011.pdf.

Note: An updated strategic plan is anticipated for release soon.

3 Providing Assistance

A General Guidelines

At every level of FSA, employees must understand the importance of customer service. While producers, customers, and potential customers must make their own decisions about program options, FSA employees are key in helping provide fundamental necessary program information and options.

In the course of their official duties, FSA employees may be often asked for recommendations. Although FSA employees can and should be responsive, employees should **not** discourage producers, customers, or potential customers from filing or making applications, or in seeking any program benefit or loan that might be generally available to the public. FSA employees need to exercise care to explain program provisions accurately and convey, as best as possible, the options that might be available so that producers, customers, and potential customers can make informed decisions.

In providing information or service to any producer, customer, or potential customer, each FSA employee **must** conduct themselves professionally and with dignity and respect. Producers, customers, and potential customers are to be treated with dignity by FSA employees.

B Employee Do's and Don'ts

Keeping the Cultural Transition Initiative, FSA's mission, and FSA's strategic plan in mind, the following are some guidelines FSA employees will follow when providing assistance.

DO...	DO NOT...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • listen • treat each individual with respect and dignity • remember that FSA employees represent FSA and not themselves • be courteous, business-like, and professional • encourage producers, customers, and potential customers to avail themselves of FSA's program and sources of program information • provide complete, accurate, and factual information that will assist a producer, customer, or potential customer in making informed decisions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • allow personal views or opinions to govern employee's conduct or the information conveyed • treat any individual disparately or favor 1 individual over another when dealing with the producer, customer, or potential customer • interrupt or appear to be rude • determine or advise any individual, producer, customer, or potential customer not to file an application, form, or loan document, because employee believes the person will be ineligible.

3 Providing Assistance (Continued)

B Employee Do's and Don'ts (Continued)

DO...	DO NOT...
ask questions to get a better understanding of what a producer, customer, or potential customer needs or wants from FSA.	subject producers, customers, or potential customers to unnecessary interrogation or questions.
respond to questions with factual information that employee knows or provide references where the information can be obtained Note: Seek assistance from other sources, such as employees, handbooks, etc., if questions or inquiries are outside employee's immediate area of expertise.	disregard questions or dismiss the customer just because the employee may not understand the issue, question, or subject. Note: Be dismissive merely because of a lack of knowledge.
try to determine if the producer, customer, or potential customer understands what employee is conveying to them.	assume that a producer, customer, or potential producer's inability to understand is "their problem".
be responsive and forthright, and convey FSA's position accurately. Example: "The program requires that to be considered an eligible livestock owner, you must have had ownership interest in the livestock for 3 years."	make what could be perceived as weak or sympathetic statements. Example: "Although I personally agree with you that this program is flawed, FSA has no authority to change the program."
<p>speak as though employee is speaking for or on behalf FSA.</p> <p>Examples: Say either of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "You will be eligible for program benefits when you are determined to have satisfied program requirements. Those requirements are..." • "Program eligibility provisions may appear difficult; however, you will only receive a decision from FSA if you file a complete application." 	<p>unwittingly characterize or convey FSA's official position.</p> <p>Examples: Do not say either of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "You cannot qualify for program benefits under the rules" • "Do not bother applying because you will not be approved or determined eligible."
treat producers, customers, and potential customers the way the employee would like to personally be treated.	be disrespectful or dismissive of anyone for any reason.

4 Action

A FSA Office Action

Deputy Administrators, directors, program managers, and supervisors will ensure that the provisions of this notice are distributed to **all** employees and committee persons.

B Employee Action

Employees and committee persons at **all** levels and offices in FSA will:

- review this notice and determine, based on appropriate and applicable program directives, the assistance that they can and **cannot** provide to producers, customers, and potential customers, in connection with completing applications
- avoid conduct or unequal treatment that could be construed by any producer, customer, or potential customer as discriminatory
- do their part in helping FSA to continue to improve and achieve its goals.