

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Farm Service Agency
Washington, DC 20250

Notice AO-1626

For: State and County Offices

2015 COC Nominations and Election

Approved by: Deputy Administrator, Field Operations



1 Overview

A Background

COC elections provide farmers and ranchers the opportunity to run for and be elected to represent producers in their community as an elected member on their local FSA COC. All farmers and ranchers are encouraged to consider running for COC seats.

Significant emphasis continues to be placed on improving COC diversity. FSA is working diligently to increase the number of underserved (minorities and women) farmers and ranchers nominated for COC using FSA-669A. State and County Offices have actively and successfully been able to place many more underserved (minorities and women) candidates' names on ballots. Efforts must be continued and expanded to ensure that underserved (minorities and women) farmers and ranchers have every opportunity for election to FSA COC's.

FSA must also continue working on encouraging voters to look to beginning farmers and ranchers as a source for nominees of COC elections. COC members and County Office employees must reach out to beginning farmers and ranchers with information and encouragement to run for a seat on COC. Beginning farmer contacts should include, but **not** be limited to, County Extension educators, and high school and college instructors.

Publicity and outreach efforts must be directed to all producers, with special emphasis on underserved (minorities and women) and beginning farmers and ranchers. Every means must be used to contact organizations whose members consist of underserved (minorities and women) farmers and ranchers, as these organizations have the opportunity to nominate farmers and ranchers for candidacy to COC.

Not only must COC members and County Office employees encourage producers to submit FSA-669A's, producers must also be strongly encouraged to return their voted ballots after selecting the candidate of their choice. Approximately 2 million ballots are mailed annually, yet only 11 to 13 percent of the ballots are returned. This means that even a small increase in the percent of ballots voted and returned can increase the opportunity for a candidate to be elected.

Disposal Date	Distribution
January 1, 2016	State Offices; State Offices relay to County Offices

Notice AO-1626

1 Overview (Continued)

B Purpose

This notice provides STC's, COC's, County Offices, Outreach Coordinators, and State Office staff responsible for COC elections with the following:

- instructions on carrying out the 2015 COC election
- 2015 COC election schedule (Exhibit 1)
- sample postcard wording for information on obtaining FSA-669-A (Exhibit 2).

C Contacts

If there are questions about this notice, contact the following.

FOR...	THEN...
2015 COC election	contact Jean Knight by: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• e-mail at jean.knight@wdc.usda.gov• telephone at 202-720-0067.
Outreach or OTIS	contact Cynthia Cuellar by: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• e-mail at cynthia.cuellar@wdc.usda.gov• telephone at 202-690-4727.

2 SED, STC, and State Outreach Coordinator Action

A Outreach

SED's and STC's shall ensure that all State and local organizations, whose members include underserved (minorities and women) farmers and ranchers, are contacted and informed of the upcoming COC nominations and elections. Tribal Governments that serve beginning farmers and ranchers and underserved (minorities and women) groups shall be provided COC nomination and election information, including COC fact sheets and posters.

SED's, in consultation with State Outreach Coordinators or designees, shall require each COC to develop an outreach plan and submit to SED through planned outreach activities entered in the Outreach Tracking and Information System (OTIS), **by June 15, 2015**. The OTIS Strategic Outreach Plan and the supporting listing of outreach activities serve as each office's plan to ensure that all producers are adequately informed of the COC nomination and election processes. The planned outreach activities, including a list of all partner organizations involved, shall be entered into OTIS at the County Office level.

2 SED, STC, and State Outreach Coordinator Action (Continued)

A Outreach (Continued)

Activity types to be used for COC outreach may include, but are **not** limited to, the following:

- broadcast and print media

Note: COC activities are the **only** media-related activities allowed to be entered into OTIS.

- conferences
- meetings
- newsletters, etc.

Planned COC election outreach activities **must** specifically promote COC elections outside the Service Center, and identify in OTIS how elections will be promoted. After activities are entered, the COC Election Outreach Plan will be populated with the activities and will be available from the OTIS “Generate a Report” section. County Offices are instructed to review the COC Election Outreach Report to ensure that the planned activities provide a complete and accurate description of COC elections outreach efforts for the year for their office.

Note: Each County Office plan **must** include methods for targeting underserved (minorities and women) farmers and ranchers.

Each office’s overall COC Election Outreach Plan includes the following items from OTIS:

- State Strategic Outreach Plan that includes the goal to improve public awareness and promote diversity of FSA COC election process

Note: The State Strategic Outreach Plan is available in OTIS. County Offices are **not** required to complete a new plan.

- planned activities listed in the COC Election Outreach Plan
- list of partner organizations as of the date of printing.

Note: These items shall be retained together in each office as the official COC Election Outreach Plan for 2015. They may be retained electronically in a shared folder to save paper and storage space. To do this, a folder must be created on user’s State/county shared drive in which these items can be stored and easily accessed by anyone in the State or County Office, as needed.

2 **SED, STC, and State Outreach Coordinator Action (Continued)**

B County Office Committee (COC) Election Postcard Information Screen

SED's and STC's shall ensure that all County Offices complete the County Office Committee (COC) Election Postcard Information Screen on the COC Election web site, as described in subparagraph 3 C, and according to the timeframe established in Exhibit 1. The Postcard Information Report will be available in the State AO Reports to allow State Offices to provide the oversight to ensure counties have entered their postcard information and the LAA's chosen to receive postcards.

C County Offices That Do Not Receive Any FSA-669A's

SED's and STC's shall closely monitor each County Office to ensure that at least 1 FSA-669A is received for each LAA up for election **before** the end of the nomination period. If a County Office has received no FSA-669A's by **July 24, 2015**, SED's and STC members will review the County Office's outreach efforts and provide assistance with obtaining a nominee by making personal contact with the following:

- eligible producers to encourage nomination of themselves or others
- partner organizations to enlist their assistance in providing an eligible nominee.

D State Outreach Coordinator Action

State Outreach Coordinators shall:

- take an active role in contacting representatives of underserved (minorities and women) groups to provide COC nomination and election information
- ensure that representatives of underserved (minorities and women) groups fully understand the responsibilities of COC's and COC nomination and election processes
- cooperate with and provide outreach assistance to County Offices and COC's
- ensure that County Offices enter all meetings and conferences for COC election outreach in OTIS
- ensure that each County Office has entered all partner organizations contacted in OTIS no later than **August 3, 2015**

Note: Each partner organization only needs to be listed once, even if contacted by multiple counties.

- provide the Partner Organizations and Contacts Report and COC Outreach Report from OTIS to SED.

3 COC and County Office Employee Action

A Outreach

COC's, with the assistance of CED's and County Office staff, shall **immediately** develop an election outreach plan to inform all producers of the upcoming COC nomination and election processes and dates. Planned activities **must** specifically promote COC elections **outside of the Service Center**, and identify in OTIS how elections will be promoted. After activities are entered, the COC Election Outreach Plan will be populated with the activities and will be available from the OTIS "Generate a Report" section. County Offices **must** generate their report and review it to ensure that the planned activities provide a complete and accurate COC Election Outreach Plan.

COC's shall ensure the following are retained together in the County Office:

- State Strategic Outreach Plan (available in OTIS)
- COC Election Outreach Plans
- list of partner organizations.

The State Strategic Outreach Plan, COC Election Outreach Plans, and list of partner organizations may be retained electronically in a shared folder to save paper and storage space. To do this, a folder **must** be created on the State/county share drive, in which these items can be stored and easily accessed by employees as needed.

Note: Each County Office plan **must** include methods for targeting underserved (minorities and women) farmers and ranchers.

COC's and County Office employees shall take specific actions to ensure that:

- **correct LAA's are holding elections**

Note: Elections held in the wrong LAA's result in added expenses in time and money for FSA. It is the joint responsibility of CED and COC in **every** County Office to accurately identify the correct LAA's up for election each year. See 15-AO, subparagraph 79 A for guidance.

- minority and female organizations in the COC jurisdiction are contacted and informed of the COC nomination and election processes
- organizations whose membership include beginning farmers and ranchers are provided nomination and election information
- FSA-669A's are available at the counter for producers requesting FSA-669A's
- all eligible voters listed in LAA's conducting elections are notified of nomination and election dates and procedure

3 COC and County Office Employee Action (Continued)

A Outreach (Continued)

- maps are posted in the Service Center and in public locations that clearly identify LAA boundaries and LAA's conducting elections.

COC's and/or employees shall:

- provide the **<http://www.fsa.usda.gov/elections>** web site address for COC election materials to the public and inform the public that for:

- FSA-669A, scroll down to the links under "Election Materials" and CLICK **"2015 Nomination Form"**

Note: FSA-669A in English and Spanish is also available at **<http://intranet.fsa.usda.gov/FSA>** for employee access.

- fact sheets, scroll down to the links under "Fact Sheets"
- publicize COC nomination and election information in newsletters, public service announcements, broadcast and print media, inserts in office mailings, or any other means of communication
- explain the duties and eligibility requirements of being a COC member to producers
- place emphasis on obtaining underserved (minorities and women) and beginning farmer or rancher nominees
- enter meetings and conferences for COC election outreach in OTIS
- enter all partner organizations contacted in OTIS, if not already entered.

B Eligible Voters Lists

The **Eligible Voters List** contains the names of all producers identified as eligible to vote in each LAA of COC. The **Eligible Voters Mailing list** includes the mailing address (residing in SCIMS) for each of the producers listed. Ballots are mailed to all producers listed on the Eligible Voter List for LAA's up for election in each County Office. COC's and County Office employees are responsible for ensuring that:

- producer mailing addresses are up-to-date in Business Partner
- voting eligibility has been updated as needed in the COC Election web site, "Producer Election Data" file
- all deceased producers have been identified as not eligible to vote by removing the check (checkmark) from the "Eligible to Vote" field.

3 COC and County Office Employee Action (Continued)

C Postcard Information Screens

Postcards will be mailed to eligible voters in LAA's holding an election instead of mailing FSA-669A's to eligible voters according to 15-AO, subparagraph 107 B. Postcards will be mailed by a printing company at no expense to State Offices. CED's **must** ensure that the County Office Committee (COC) Election Postcard Information Screen on the COC Election web site is completed correctly to generate postcard mailings to eligible voters in the LAA's holding an election. If these steps are **not** completed, or the wrong LAA's are selected, **County Offices will be responsible for conducting their own postcard mailing, including postage expenses.**

Note: See Exhibit 2 for an example of the wording to be used on postcards.

The County Office Committee (COC) Election Postcard Information Screen on the COC Election web site:

- will display the following message at the top of the County Office Committee (COC) Election Screen, "According to the Current COC Directory the Following COC and LAA Up For Election this Year"
- requires selecting COC and LAA's up for each election in 2015
- will be available to County Offices from **May 1 through May 15, 2015.**

If COC and LAA up for election according to the COC Directory are **not** the same COC and LAA identified by COC and CED up for election, then:

- **COC and CED shall follow guidance in 15-AO, subparagraph 79 A to ensure that the correct LAA is selected**
- State Office shall be contacted, if assistance is needed.

IF COC and LAA up for election according to the COC Directory are...	THEN...
correct	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • select the same COC and LAA from the choices on the County Office Committee (COC) Election Screen • CLICK "Submit" and the message, "Transaction Completed", will be displayed • print the County Office Committee (COC) Election Screen, with the message, "Transaction Completed", and save.

3 COC and County Office Employee Action (Continued)

C Postcard Information Screens (Continued)

IF COC and LAA up for election according to the COC Directory are...	THEN...
incorrect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> select the correct COC and LAA on the County Office Committee (COC) Election Screen from the choices in the drop-down lists CLICK “Submit” and the message, “Transaction Completed”, will be displayed print the County Office Committee (COC) Election Screen, with the message, “Transaction Completed”, and save update the COC Directory Report with the correct term and years left in term, except in COC jurisdictions that consolidated in the last year and have lost the ability to make changes to COC 1 and COC 2 after redrawing their LAA boundary changes to 1 COC and updating the Control Table, accordingly.

D FSA-669A’s and COC Slate

Individuals who want to file FSA-669A’s may nominate themselves or other eligible candidates. Eligible candidates may be nominated by organizations representing underserved (minorities and women) farmers and ranchers, or by any eligible producer whose records are administered in the same COC jurisdiction.

FSA-669A:

- may be accepted any time before the opening of the nomination period

Note: Date stamp and completely fill out all FSA-669-A’s received in the County Office.

- provides a “Signature” block for individuals or organizations that are using FSA-669A to nominate an eligible candidate other than themselves

Note: It is the nominator’s responsibility to obtain the nominee’s certification and signature **before** returning FSA-669A to the County Office.

- includes a check (✓) in the “Nominee’s Certification” block to identify write-in candidates after election results are known.

3 COC and County Office Employee Action (Continued)

D FSA-669A's and COC Slate (Continued)

There is **no** required minimum number of eligible nominees for a COC's slate, unless there are **no** FSA-669A's filed for an LAA election. If no FSA-669A's are received, see 15-AO, paragraph 108. A separate FSA-669A **must** be used for each individual nomination. Names shall **not** be added to COC slates after the nomination period closes, if at least 1 candidate files FSA-669A. If no FSA-669A's are received in a County Office with 4 or more LAA's, COC **must** consider a reduction in LAA's **before** the next election to increase the pool of potential candidates.

There must be at least 1 candidate in each LAA holding an election. However, it is in the best interest of each COC to **actively solicit more than 1 nominee:**

- to increase voter interest and participation
- so that an alternate will be available to serve in the unlikely event the LAA's regular member becomes unavailable for any reason.

The nomination of eligible producers by voters or community-based organizations is the **only** method used to obtain candidates for COC elections. COC's are responsible for ensuring that all producers are knowledgeable about the nomination process for COC positions.

Candidate **names will not be added by COC's to FSA-669A's** after the end of the nomination period. Every effort **must** be made to obtain at least 1 nomination **before** the end of the nomination period.

E Mailing FSA-669's

Name and address records of eligible voters in SCIMS and the COC Election web site are provided to the printing company by Kansas City. This database is used by the printer to mail FSA-669's to eligible voters in the LAA's chosen by County Office users. COC's and County Offices are responsible for ensuring that the information provided is correct. Changes made in FSA records after the data has been provided to the printing company will **not** be reflected in the name and address database used by the printer for FSA-669's. The deadline for changes to be included in the data sent to the printing company is **September 25, 2015**. After the data has been provided to the printer, no changes can be made, including removing or adding nominee names.

FSA-669's will be mailed to eligible voters **no later than November 9, 2015**, by the printing company.

4 CED Action

A Outreach

CED's shall:

- **review the current COC Member Information Report with COC's to ensure that the correct LAA is identified for holding an election in 2015**
- take an active role in contacting representatives of underserved (minorities and women) groups to solicit nominations on FSA-669A's and ensure that these groups fully understand COC's role
- be available to meet with underserved (minorities and women) farmer and rancher groups and groups whose membership includes beginning farmers, to fully explain COC nomination and election procedures
- locally reproduce FSA-669A's, fact sheets, and posters from FSA's Internet at **<http://www.fsa.usda.gov/elections>** and post them in public locations in COC jurisdictions
- distribute information to eligible producers on how to obtain FSA-669A's by completing the County Office Committee (COC) Election Postcard Information Screen on the COC Election web site according to subparagraph 3 C

Note: Postcards with this information will be mailed to producers in identified LAA's by a printing company at no expense to State Offices.

- ensure that all producers are informed of all election information, including LAA's holding an election, and where to obtain FSA-669A's
- conduct informational meetings to explain the COC nomination and election processes to the public
- work with COC's to ensure that information and meetings are thoroughly publicized through all available means.

B Eligible Voters Lists

CED's shall ensure that:

- producer mailing addresses are up-to-date in SCIMS
- voting eligibility has been updated as needed in the COC Election web site, "Producer Election Data" file

4 CED Action (Continued)

B Eligible Voters Lists (Continued)

- all deceased producers have been identified as not eligible to vote by removing the check (checkmark) from the “Eligible to Vote” field in the Producer Election Database section of the COC Election web site.

C COC Election Nominations

CED’s shall:

- **ensure that all nominees listed on FSA-593 are recorded in SCIMS as individuals, and are flagged “Eligible to Vote” and listed in the correct COC and LAA in the Producer Election Data File according to 15-AO, subparagraph 109 C, before attempting to enter the ballot information and nominee names into the COC election web site**

Note: Particular attention **must** be given to nominees who are members of entities such as trusts, estates, corporations, limited partnerships, and limited liability corporations. **Only** the eligible voting member may be a candidate. This individual **must** have an Individual Profile Record established in SCIMS/ Business Partner according to 15-AO, paragraph 93. Nominees **must** be on the ballot using their name **only** with no other business or entity identifier.

Example: John Smith, Jr. or Sue L. Smith shall **not** be entered as John Smith, Jr./ DBA Smith Farms, or Sue L. Smith Farms.

- send completed FSA-593 to the State Office no later than September 7 each year
- enter ballot and nominee information into COC Election web site according to dates provided in Exhibit 1.

2015 COC Election Schedule

The following provides the 2015 COC election schedule.

Date	Activity
April 1, 2015	<p>COC's and County Offices will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ensure that the correct LAA's are identified for holding an election in 2015 by reviewing the current COC Member Information Report in the COC Election web site, "Reports" section and FSA-668 • complete a review of LAA boundaries • send all LAA boundary determinations on FSA-582 to STC for approval. <p>Note: COC's shall document reviews and determinations of LAA's up for election and LAA boundaries in COC minutes.</p>
May 1 to 15, 2015	<p>County Offices will complete the County Office Committee (COC) Election Postcard Information Screen on the COC Election web site with LAA's up for election. Producers in LAA holding an election will receive postcards with information on obtaining FSA-669A.</p>
May 15, 2015	<p>STC's complete FSA-582 reviews, approve FSA-582's, and notify County Offices.</p> <p>Note: STC's shall document reviews and determinations about LAA boundaries in STC minutes.</p>
June 1, 2015	<p>COC's and County Offices will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • review the Current COC Member Information Report to ensure accuracy of LAA's holding elections • review eligible voter lists and verify accuracy as follows: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • remove check (✓) from the "Eligible to Vote" field in the Producer Election Data File for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • producers who are deceased • voters for whom no valid address can be obtained • any entries of "Unknown". <p>Note: The "Receive Mail" indicator is overridden for COC elections. All producers' names on the Eligible Voters List will be sent a ballot.</p>

2015 COC Election Schedule (Continued)

Date	Activity
June 1, 2015 (Continued)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> add eligible voters names by checking (✓) the “Eligible to Vote” field in the Producer Election Data File ensure that all eligible voters are associated with the correct COC and LAA make an eligibility determination for producers listed on the “Producers Not Associated With a COC/LAA” list with a date last updated in FY 2014-2015 that can be associated with COC and LAA <p>Note: This will remove their names from this list and place them on the eligible voters list or ineligible voters list, as designated. It is expected that there will always be names remaining on the “Producers Not Associated With a COC/LAA” list that cannot be associated with COC and LAA. Counties that already removed all names that were on the list shall apply this guidance to names added in the future.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> issue public notice of election and LAA boundaries. <p>Note: COC’s and CED’s shall review LAA’s holding elections and eligible voter lists for accuracy and record their determinations in COC minutes.</p>
June 15, 2015	Postcards with information on how to obtain nomination forms will be mailed by printing company to producers in LAA’s holding an election, according to LAA’s selected by county office user.
June 15, 2015	<p>COC’s and County Offices:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> increase outreach activities to acquire nominees and fully publicize the nomination and election processes complete and print eligible voters list make eligible voter lists available to the public on request.
July 27, 2015	SED’s and STC’s ensure all counties have received at least one FSA-669A and provide assistance in obtaining at least 1 nominee where necessary.
August 3, 2015	Final date for County Offices to receive FSA-669A’s or for FSA-669A’s to be postmarked. County Offices begin reviewing FSA-669A’s.
August 10, 2015	Final date for County Office to notify State Office if no FSA-669A’s were received for an election.

2015 COC Election Schedule (Continued)

Date	Activity
August 17, 2015	Final date for State Offices to notify DAFO that no FSA-669A's were received in any counties.
September 2, 2015	<p>County Offices shall ensure that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • each nominee is in SCIMS as an individual (first name, possibly middle initial, and last name only; no entities or DBA's) • SCIMS/Business Partner matches the race, ethnicity, and gender information on FSA-669A • the correct determination codes for race, ethnicity, and gender have been selected for each nominee in SCIMS/Business Partner <p>Note: If nominee has entered the race, ethnicity, and gender on FSA-669A, the determination codes in Business Partner shall be updated accordingly and show, "Customer Declared".</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • each nominee is flagged "Eligible to Vote", and in the correct COC and LAA in the Producer Election Data File. <p>Final date for County Office to mail congratulation letters to nominees.</p>
September 2 to 22, 2015	County Offices enter nominee and ballot data in COC Elections web site according to 15-AO, subparagraph 109 D. State Offices shall monitor closely to ensure that all elections are entered timely.
September 25, 2015	<p>Deadline for changes in the following to be included in data provided to printing company:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • name and address • voter eligibility.
November 9, 2015	FSA-669 to be mailed by printing company to each producer on eligible voter lists for LAA's holding election.
December 7, 2015	Voted FSA-669's or FSA-669B's to be returned to County Office or postmarked.
December 14, 2015	Final date for COC's and County Offices to count FSA-669's and FSA-669B's.
December 7 to 21, 2015	Elections web site available for County Offices to enter election results. County Offices enter election results.

Example Postcard Wording

Following is an example of the wording used on postcards according to subparagraph 3 C.

<p style="text-align: center;">County FSA Committee (COC) Election</p> <p>June 15 through August 3, 2015, is the period for nominating farmers and ranchers as candidates for the local COC election. FSA encourages all eligible producers to nominate themselves, or another eligible producer, to run for office. Nomination forms (FSA-669A's) are available:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• at http://www.fsa.usda.gov/elections, scroll down to the links under "Election Materials" and CLICK "2015 Nomination Form"• by picking up FSA-669A at your local FSA office• by calling your local office and requesting FSA-669A be sent to you. <p style="text-align: center;">NOMINATE AND VOTE!</p>
