

NEWS

Consent Decree Action Team Works All Out

by *Melanie Shull, County Executive Director, Suffolk County, Va.; and Ann Eggleston, Farm Loan Program Specialist, Indiana State Office*

If you think your job is demanding, try working 12 hours a day, 7 days a week, hundreds of miles from home. Those are the conditions some FSA employees had to deal with working in Washington, D.C. as members of the Consent Decree Action Team (CDAT). The Action Team was formed to comply with the terms of two class action lawsuits: Timothy C. Pigford and Cecil Brewington versus Daniel Glickman.

The plaintiffs in both suits alleged that USDA discriminated against them on the basis of race in its farm credit and noncredit benefits programs. Furthermore, the suit alleged that when plaintiffs complained of discrimination, the Department failed to properly respond and investigate. USDA and the plaintiffs signed a consent decree March 14, 1999, whereby the parties agreed upon mutually satisfactory terms for the complete resolution of all the

claims that have or could have been asserted by the plaintiffs.

As a result, FSA had to pull together all the documentation concerning each claimant's history as an FSA customer. With approximately 20,000 claimants, this turned out to be a huge undertaking — an effort that is expected to continue into early this year.

To meet this challenge, FSA formed the Action Team, appointing approximately 250 employees from county and state offices as well as Agency headquarters in Washington, D.C. The team includes Farm Loan and Program Technicians, Farm Loan Managers, County Executive Directors, Farm Loan Officers, Farm Loan and Program State Office Specialists, County Office Reviewers, District Directors, National Office Farm Loan Program employees, Finance Office employees, and the Executive Director for State Office Operation's staff.

Administrator Kelly named Dee Cole, the Assistant Deputy Administrator for Farm Loan Programs, as the team's Project Manager.

The work is rigorous. Each group of employees spends an average of 10 to 12 hours every day — including weekends and holidays — perusing thousands of files and conducting countless telephone interviews. Members work on rotation, spending two weeks every month on the team in Washington and two weeks back at their regular jobs.

Despite tight working quarters, unrelenting deadlines, and lonely weeks away from family and friends, the team members have remained dedicated and positive. "It's been a great learning experience," says one. "We get to see how other people in different parts of the country do things, and have the

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Consent Decree Action Team One.

ADMINISTRATOR'S COLUMN

The Road Ahead

The fanfare and hoopla surrounding the start of calendar year 2000 ignores the fact that the true start of the new millennium is still a year away. And for most FSA employees, the new year probably means nothing more exciting than even more work to do.

It's in the nature of what we do and how well FSA is thought of that we are hit with a high workload in the first part of any calendar year; and this one promises to be especially challenging. In addition to the Conservation Reserve Program signup, we are administering a number of ad hoc disaster programs, including big ticket items such as \$1.4 billion for the Crop Loss Disaster Assistance Program. And, to top it off, we're already into farm loan season, with over \$5.8 billion in loan and guarantee authority to administer.

There are positive things to note as well. We received an additional \$56 million in our fiscal year 2000 appropriations, meaning that we can hang on to all of our permanent full-time employees. In addition, in a number of

severely understaffed states, we were able to hire staff to fill some badly needed permanent positions.

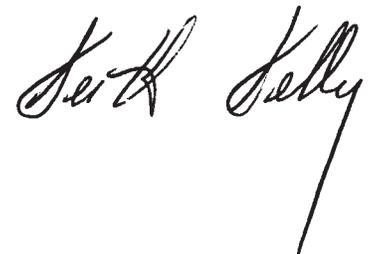
Compared to a year ago, we had many more temporary employees on board during the first quarter of this fiscal year to help with loan deficiency payments and other emergency work. This additional help allowed the Agency to significantly reduce delays in getting aid to farmers. Additional funding also allowed us to fill 101 new farm loan officer-trainee positions nationally, representing a long-term investment in farm loan program staff.

It doesn't help our stress levels knowing that there is only so much we can do to help struggling producers through the current crisis. With your direct links to farmers and their communities, you FSA field employees especially feel the strain. You see producers across the counter every day; they are also your friends and neighbors. But your concern doesn't go unnoticed. Surveys of our customers show that you're not only **helpful**, but **sympathetic** and **understanding**. For

many farmers and ranchers, that kind of moral support makes a difference in these difficult times.

I wish I could say that things will turn around soon. However, the farm economy shows no signs of letting up — current projections call for low commodity prices to last throughout this year. However, I can promise you that here in Washington we're still fighting for further relief of staffing shortages, as well as a complete overhaul of current farm programs to address the reality of the agricultural market.

Meanwhile, please accept my personal thanks for your staunch commitment to meeting our customers' needs to the fullest. Keep up the good work — and know you have my steadfast support through whatever lies ahead this year.



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COFFEE TALK

- Coffee is the world's second largest agricultural commodity after cotton.
- By drinking two cups of coffee a day, you are consuming the annual harvest of 18 coffee trees.
- Americans drink more coffee than any other nation — 2.3 billion pounds each year.

Source: *Conservation International*

CDAT

continued from first page



Consent Decree Action Team Two.

opportunity to see things beyond our own little world."

"Some of the invisible barriers that have separated farm loan program employees and farm program employees were broken down for the members," says another. "I have made friendships with other employees that are not bound by program area."

Others delighted in finding time for holiday shopping among Washington's colorful army of street merchants. And many acquired a taste for the hot dogs and soft pretzels sold from the vendor's cart at the northeast corner of USDA's South Building.

As difficult as the task has been in Washington, team members would be going nowhere without the tireless

assistance of the county office staffs in many states. Claimants in the lawsuits were required to name at least one similarly situated white farmer (SSWF) for comparison to their own situations. The average number named per claimant was 4, and over 19,000 claims have been received so far. That means that county office staffs have had to find information pertaining to at least 76,000 white farmers. The information gathered by CDAT is eventually matched up with that gathered by the field offices. The combined information is then forwarded to Portland, Ore., where a court-appointed adjudicator from outside USDA makes a final decision. So far the adjudicator has found in favor of the claimants in 60 percent of the cases considered.

The work is frantic because obtaining documentation for each case must be done within a deadline set under the consent decree, or a ruling is made automatically for the claimant. "I'm amazed at the dedication and the grit these people are showing," says Administrator Kelly. "They're really coming through for us in a very difficult situation."

The project is expected to end early this year. All those involved will undoubtedly be ready for a long vacation; but they can take satisfaction in knowing that they have given more than 100 percent effort to a difficult task, while keeping up with their regular jobs.

CDAT Teams Recognized for Outstanding Effort

To show appreciation for the CDAT teams' work, FSA held an awards ceremony in Washington, D.C. on December 10. All the CDAT team members were present — the first time all the participants had been together at one time. Administrator Kelly thanked everyone on the CDAT teams for their extraordinary work. The Administrator, Carolyn Cooksie, Dee Cole, and Ken Nagel from EDSO paid special recognition to 23 CDAT employees for developing CDAT-related guidebooks and presenting training, and for leadership, dedication, and other accomplishments.

After the ceremony, Administrator Kelly invited all the team members to take a tour of the White House. All 250 employees attended and were even given permission to take photos. "It was so meaningful that the Administrator and others took time for the awards ceremony," said Melanie Shull, one of the team members. "And the White House tour was spectacular!"



Cooperation Pays Off in New Mexico

As the service center concept continues to become reality, USDA is dismantling more and more obstacles to one-stop shopping for producers. One big concern was the multitude of computer systems USDA agencies had been using, most of which were not compatible with one another.

Out of this tangle of wires came the Common Computing Environment (CCE), an initiative seeking a consistent, common, and compatible information technology solution that allows sharing of data and equipment among the agencies that make up each service center. In all, 26,000 computers were distributed to state offices and field service centers across the country as part of this effort.

Members of the FSA, NRCS, and RD Information Technology staffs worked side by side for months preparing for the installation, training, and deployment of the CCE equipment. New Mexico's three-agency team had already set the stage for the CCE project by working together on two other successful projects. One involved work in Los Lunas, N.M., one of nine service center sites chosen to pilot the Business Processing Reengineering project for testing software applications. The team also achieved its LAN/WAN/Voice installation through this type of cooperative effort.

For the CCE project, the team worked under the leadership of Larry Burnett, FSA State Executive Director; Rosendo Trevino III, NRCS State Conservationist; and Stephanie Gonzales, RD State Director. The CCE Team first met to develop a common strategy. And did they ever come up with a plan!

The team developed three major goals:

- train all employees across agency lines to the greatest extent possible, bringing them in by field service center,



New Mexico's CCE Deployment Team left to right. First row: Rita Navarrete, Linda Hood, and Ida Monteith. Second row: Pat Bristol, Grace Phillips, and Jamie Nichols. Third row: Salomon Ramirez, Sal Davila, and Troy Hood.
photo by Ernie Watson

- develop an installation plan based on the team's training schedule, and
- send systems home with users after completion of training.

The deployment team came up with an energized training plan to provide a solid foundation that the agencies could build upon; one where users were willing and able to share knowledge in service centers across the state as well as in the State Office itself.

The New Mexico CCE crew held its first training session in June 1999, and they will continue until every employee in all three agencies has completed training by the end of this month. From 22 to 26 employees are being brought in at a time from field service centers and state offices for this intensive training in the State Office's training center. In 3½ days, employees are introduced to the Windows NT Operating System and software, Netscape, Internet browsing, e-mail, and troubleshooting and support procedures. And, if that's not enough to absorb, how about contractor training for Microsoft Office products, including 97 Word, PowerPoint, Excel, and an introduction to Outlook.

All employees are being trained, since the CCE equipment is to be shared among employees in offices without a one-to-one ratio of workstations. During the off-training week, the CCE Team prepares and tests the next group of workstations and laptops for the upcoming training session.

The CCE Team also developed a System Binder, which goes home with each computer. The binder contains everything the users will need to know about that specific workstation, as well as the components of the various programs, covering items such as troubleshooting and tape inventory for backups. A list of members of the Application Support Team (comprised of people from the three agencies who are computer literate and willing to share their knowledge) is part of the package.

Cross-training is taking place across agency lines. This component of the overall plan envisions that eventually, when Information Technology support is needed, just one member from the cross-training group will need to make a trip to provide assistance to personnel in any of the three agencies. The team is committed to this goal and feels this is the kind of approach needed to truly make a "team" work.

Larry Mitchell, Deputy Administrator for Farm Programs, and Chris Niedermayer, Assistant to the Deputy Administrator, visited the training center last summer and were highly impressed with this unprecedented type of training. "I'm encouraged to witness such efficient and effective cooperation among the agencies," said Mitchell. Niedermayer added that, "The New Mexico team really took the training a few steps further.

It's refreshing to see such a collaborative effort."

Many people were involved in making this project work, including team leaders Ida Monteith, FSA; Sal Davila, NRCS; and Pat Bristol, RD. The Point of Contact and Training Coordinator for the Deployment Team is Linda Hood, NRCS. In addition, the CCE Team includes Jamie Nichols and Grace Phillips, NRCS Field Computer Specialists; and the Administrative Officers

from the three agencies: Salomon Ramirez, FSA; Troy Hood, NRCS; and Rita Navarrete, RD.

Just one of the goals established in New Mexico says it all: "We hope to achieve efficiencies across agency lines and enhance customer service today and into the 21st Century." Looks like New Mexico has hit the road running and has prepared the way for the rest of the country to follow.

CEPD's State Environmental Coordinator Training

by James Fortner, Conservation and Environmental Protection Division

Last September, the National Office's Conservation and Environmental Protection Division (CEPD) held its annual training for State Environmental Coordinators (SECs) in Nashville, Tenn. In addition to the SECs, several attendees were present from FSA's National Office, NRCS, and the Department's Hazardous Materials Management Group.

As we know, FSA is committed to helping the environment through several programs, including the Conservation Reserve Program. Agency efforts are supported by numerous environmental laws and regulations. FSA has found that the most effective way to keep our programs strong has been through the appointment of one employee from each state to serve as an SEC. SECs are resources of information on environmental issues and serve as contacts for other employees in the state. They also provide environmental training to appropriate employees in their respective states.

Larry Mitchell, Deputy Administrator for Farm Programs, opened the training session by stressing the importance of the SEC program and emphasizing his commitment to support it. He also

presented awards to two of the SECs. Jeff Johnson of Minnesota received an award for outstanding service as an SEC, and Ethan Kelley of Maine received an award for successfully implementing the Debt for Nature Program.



Jeff Johnson of Minnesota and Ethan Kelley of Maine receive SEC awards.

CEPD focused an entire day of training on historic preservation. With recent changes to the regulations implementing section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act, CEPD believed it was extremely important to devote a considerable amount of time to the changes. CEPD spent another day on Hazardous Materials, First Responder Awareness Training. This was designed as a basic-level course for individuals who may come in contact with hazardous materials. It provided an overview of hazardous materials, steps on identification, environmental health and safety issues for FSA employees, and what to do and who to notify in case of discovery of hazardous materials.



Demonstration of health and safety protective gear used for hazardous waste cleanup.

Other topics included FSA's conservation programs, due diligence, and environmental justice. Representatives from NRCS presented segments on wetland determinations, highly erodible land compliance, and animal feeding operations.

FSA Carves a Path for Duck Valley Youth

by Kaylyn Talbot, State Outreach Coordinator, Idaho State Office

I was driving down Highway 51 south of Bruneau, Idaho one day, on my way to the Duck Valley Indian Reservation. My mind began to wander, and I thought about the Native Americans who used to live in this breathtaking country and freely roamed over thousands of acres amid the flat rocky buttes and rolling hills. My view of the Humboldt Mountains, with snow-capped tips rising majestically to the sky as cattle and horses grazed in the lush green valley, was probably just the same as theirs had been over a hundred years ago.

A lot has changed since that beautiful vision. About 1,000 Shoshone-Paiute Native Americans now reside on a 289,819-acre reservation straddling the Idaho/Nevada border. Beef cattle is the primary economic activity nowadays. I was going out to the main town of Owyhee to meet with several young people, their parents, and youth rodeo advisors to talk about FSA's Youth Loan Program.

I walked into the room with my assistant, Debbie Chandler from the Elmore, Idaho County Office. We found 12 youths and 8 parents waiting. The youth program has been around for a number of years, but it wasn't until Sherry Crutcher, a youth rodeo advisor on the reservation, discovered its value that it gained popularity.

It all started about 6 years ago when Sherry's son R. C. wanted to start a small cattle operation. Sherry explored different options only to find closed doors for anyone under 18 years old. She contacted FSA and discovered the youth loan program. R. C.'s dreams came true when he received a loan to



Sherry Crutcher (left) and Duck Valley Reservation youths.

photo by Kaylyn Talbot

buy 10 head of cattle. Sherry says, "I was just looking out for my own boy, but then found out we could help other kids, so I decided to get things rolling." And grow it has, from the one loan for R.C. to loans for 31 different kids. All the kids are active with the youth rodeo and with the care of their parents' and other community members' livestock. So the loan program complements their interests.

Sherry puts her heart and soul into the success of the program because, "We don't have a whole lot else here, and ranching and horses are our way of life." With unemployment reaching as high as 37 percent, it doesn't leave a lot of opportunities for young people. Leona Hatch, another youth rodeo advisor, says these kids are extremely fortunate to be involved with this program.

The kids are from 10 to 17 years old and their loans run from 1 to 6 years. Their operations consist of 7 to 35 head of heifers, steers, and cows. Each youth is responsible for the feeding, branding, breeding, vaccination,

recordkeeping, and marketing of their cattle. Sherry sees a lot of value in this program, especially with the bookkeeping. "I am really strong about teaching these kids the book work. Kids are what we teach them."

The pride in these kids' eyes was just incredible. Their smiles stretched from ear to ear as they talked to me about their operations, their responsibilities, and the opportunity to be ranchers. Jared Kelley, 17, has been with the program 4 years and is a true success story. He started with 1 lippee calf and has increased

his herd to 35. He hopes to head for the College of Southern Idaho and then return to ranch with his mother. His advice to the other kids — "Just stick with it." I didn't even have to ask what Jared's mom thinks of the program. One look at her face showed the immense pride in her heart for her son.

Monta Green, Farm Loan Officer in the Elmore County Office, says, "I enjoy working with the kids because this program helps them see that there is more to life than watching TV. They realize they can have goals and reach them. It has been a slow process to gain the trust that we have now. It takes patience and perseverance, but I believe we have accomplished an acceptance that goes beyond just a working relationship."

All these kids now have hope of seeing their dreams come true, whether it be the opportunity to go off to college or to stay and be a rancher. All thanks to the efforts of Sherry Crutcher, Leona Hatch, and a small service provided by FSA.

Indiana's Operation Sweet Corn

by Jeff Fisher, CED, Jackson County FSA Office, Ind.

From a kernel of an idea grew abundant, hearty stalks of corn to feed the hungry. It all started when FSA employees in Jackson County, Ind. noticed their county's old poor farm lying fallow. Historically, poor farms were land set aside for the housing and support of the poor. Most of Jackson County's poor farm has been bought up for other uses, but about 4 acres remain. So, with Secretary Glickman's Community Food Security Initiative in mind, we decided that the land shouldn't go to waste, but should appropriately be used for its original intent — to feed the hungry.

Four acres (174,240 square feet!) is quite a bit for one FSA county office to handle. So last May, we combined efforts with other FSAers in southern and central Indiana to plant sweet corn. A total of 28 county offices in 4 Indiana districts participated in Operation Sweet Corn. About 40 FSA employees gave their time to grow, harvest, and distribute the corn to food banks, soup kitchens, shelters, churches, and nursing homes throughout the area. In all, FSA employees donated 39,600 ears of corn last

August to 48 different food distribution locations.

Troy Hobson, CED in the Monroe County Office and one of the volunteers, says that though it was hard work, he really enjoyed being part of this project. "It was rewarding and worthwhile. The food banks and other facilities really appreciated our efforts."

With help from generous producers, we were able to keep expenses to a minimum. Pioneer and Bundy Brothers Feeds of Medora furnished the seed, while Rose Acre Farms donated granulated chicken manure fertilizer. Local farmer Earl Ayers kindly volunteered to help us plant the crop.

Operation Sweet Corn had value beyond helping reduce hunger. It made the public more aware of how prevalent chronic hunger is and how to help through donating excess food from gardens and fields. And we learned the locations of our local food distribution points. In fact, the project went so well, we hope to be back again this year, helping fill the pantries of the needy!

PRAYING WITH PRETZELS

Thought to bring good luck, pretzels have been called the world's oldest snack food. Invented by monks, pretzels once carried deep, religious meaning. The folded strips of dough resemble the folded arms of someone praying in the usual manner in those days, while the three holes represented the Christian Holy Trinity.

In medieval times, pretzels were given to children as rewards for learning their prayers. Today, they've lost their religious meaning, but pretzels are still among the world's most popular snacks.

Source: The Learning Kingdom



FSA employees harvesting sweet corn.

photo by Jeff Fisher



The Holidays May Be Over, But the Electric Bill Lingers...

While many of us ushered in the holiday season with some festive decorations on our office doors and around our work spaces, some FSA employees in the National Office took matters leaps further. If you work in the USDA South Building, you probably heard the buzz during the holidays about the 5th floor, 7th wing.



Some of Santa's elves show off their work.
photo by Eric Parsons



"Rudolph" the Reindeer and others party down.
photo by Dann Stuart

Perhaps you were persuaded to go over there by friends or felt compelled to take a look yourself. And you weren't disappointed. The entire corridor was ablaze with colorful lights, wreaths, garlands, and even the faint ringing of holiday carols wafted down the hall. It was compliments of some creative FSA employees in DACO's Procurement and Donations Division (PDD) and Warehouse and Inventory Division; DAFP's Tobacco and Peanuts

Division; DAM's Information Technology Services Division; and the Operations Review and Analysis Staff.

Laurie Montgomery of PDD says, "Originally, all the divisions here had individual decorations up. Then we thought, why not combine our talents. So a bunch of us got together and connected all our lights and garlands together." The stunning and cheerful

result definitely perked up the USDA complex and created quite the stir, as people from other agencies all over the South and Administration buildings came by to take a peek.

Terri Facini of DACO sums it up, "If you needed some holiday spirit, you certainly didn't have to look any further than the 5th floor, 7th wing!"

SMOOTH OR CRUNCHY?

Americans consume an average of 12 pounds of peanuts per person per year. Survey says...men prefer smooth peanut butter while the women like it crunchy.

Source: The Food Files



Answers to December's Puzzle

A	P	S	R	G	O	A	T			
C	H	R	I	S	T	M	A	S	I	W
O	U	R	W	N	E					
R	U	N	T	E	O	R	K	I	N	
N	I	C	U	M	I	N	T			
	N	S	S	S	U	L	K	Y		
S	A	G	E	E	M	E	I			
O		P	L	A	N	T	A	I	N	S

CALENDAR OF UPCOMING EVENTS

Date	Location	Event
January 11-13	Lafayette, La.	Associate Administrator Parks Shackelford to attend Louisiana Agriculture Industries Association meeting
January 17		Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Day
January 28-30	Kingsport, Tenn.	Administrator Kelly to attend Farm Expo 2000

Note: The above is subject to change.