

The Heartland Tour: America's Farmers Speak Up

By Kathy Helgerson, SD; Pat Sanchez, NM; and Erica Szlosek, CA

This spring, USDA hosted a series of farm forums across the nation to talk with producers about the 1996 Farm Bill's impact on agricultural producers.

Secretary Glickman set up the forums to see how farmers and ranchers are doing. "There's no industry more important to America than agriculture. These meetings are a crucial way for us to listen to producers' thoughts on keeping agriculture strong and competitive."

The forums addressed Glickman's priority of "challenging USDA to strengthen the farm safety net while moving toward a more market-oriented farm policy." FSA coordinated the forums in all seven states: Maine, Kentucky, South Dakota, Florida, New Mexico, California, and Iowa.

On April 8th, 300 farmers, ranchers, and dairy producers attended the forum in New Mexico. Congressman Joe Skeen, Secretary Glickman, Administrator Kelly, Under Secretaries Jim Lyons and Miley Gonzales, and the farmers discussed Karnal Bunt quarantines, the Guest Labor Bill, environmental and pesticide regulations, proposed dairy price changes, cattle grazing on federal lands, NAFTA, and the Packers and Stockyards Act.

The South Dakota forum kicked off the next day. Glickman, Kelly, Assistant Secretary Mike Dunn, Risk Management Agency Administrator Ken

Ackerman, Senator Tom Daschle, and Representative John Thune met with 1,800 producers from six states. Producers asked for quick action on the packer concentration issue and encouraged USDA to enforce provisions of the Packers and Stockyards Act to increase beef prices. Producers expressed the need to make crop insurance a better risk management tool for farmers and the need to increase County Committee participation in the Environmental Quality Incentives Program. They also discussed trade issues, product and meat labeling, livestock price reporting, and proposed organic farming rules.

Joe Matthews, a long-time farmer from Day County, South Dakota, summed up the crowd's message: "We are getting the same price for our products today as we did 50 years ago. Our cost of living has increased and technology alone can't make up the difference. Mr. Secretary, you couldn't live on the same salary you received 50 years ago, and neither can we." Glickman answered, "I fully recognize the depth of the economic distress facing farmers in the northern Plains, and I promise to do as much as I can to help. The message is profound and we have got to respond."



The New Mexico Farm Forum (from left) Miley Gonzales, Under Secretary for Research, Education, and Economics; Jim Lyons, Under Secretary for Natural Resources and Environment; Administrator Kelly; Congressman Joe Skeen (R-NM), Chairman of the Agriculture Appropriations Subcommittee; and Secretary Glickman.

ADMINISTRATOR'S COLUMN

The Latest on Administrative Convergence

The wheels are moving on administrative convergence. On March 16, Secretary Glickman approved the Administrative Convergence Action Team's (ACAT) initial report and framework to implement this wide-reaching concept. The Secretary emphasized his desire to implement this project by October 1 and will form an Administrative Convergence Implementation Team to aid in this effort.

Currently, three separate structures provide support to NRCS, FFAS, and RD mission areas — down from nine in 1993. The streamlining process will continue by combining these three structures into one unit, called the Support Services Bureau. Also, the Bureau will report to a "Board of Directors" consisting of the Administrators of the serviced agencies. The states will have their own Board of Directors to oversee the State Support Services Bureau operations. Authority will thus be delegated to the state level to conduct most administrative functions, closer to the customer.

This action is appropriate at this time because a consolidated structure will deliver better services to our local customers and employees. There is no longer justification for maintaining three administrative support units in each state to support collocated office staff. A consolidated structure will also provide for a new consistency in administrative policy and make better use of limited administrative resources.

The Secretary emphasizes the need for establishing a common computing environment which he wants installed and operating in the year 2002, along with improving management systems for hiring, travel, procurement, and accounting.

When fully implemented, this plan is projected to achieve a 47 percent reduction in administrative staffing from FY 1993 levels. Through FY 1997, we have achieved a 31 percent reduction. No additional county office closings will result directly from this action, although future closings may be mandated by program changes and budget reductions.

The target date for formation of the new organization is October 1, 1998. Upon formation, a full delegation of authority will be given to state leaders to make administrative decisions. A complete staffing plan must be approved much earlier in order to make this happen.

The Administrative Convergence Implementation Team will be responsible for developing detailed staffing plans, delegations of authority, functional statements, and all other docu-



The graphic features the USDA logo at the top, followed by the text "United States Department of Agriculture". Below this is the word "VISION" in large, bold, blue letters. Underneath "VISION" is a bold, black text block: "A customer-driven model agency with a diverse and multi-talented workforce, empowered and accountable to deliver programs and services efficiently, and dedicated to promoting an economically viable and environmentally sound American agriculture." At the bottom right of the graphic is the "Farm Service Agency" logo.

ments necessary to implement the plan. Special effort will be made to ensure continued union/employee participation as implementation begins. State leaders and field and Headquarters administrative staff must also be a part of this process.

A lot of details still need to be worked out, and we'll keep you up to date as the plan is developed.



A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "S. H. Kelly".

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Hispanic Strawberry Growers Transform Bitter Event into Sweet Future

by Darby Patterson, La Cooperativa Campesina de California

In March 1995, a series of storms raged through California, turning much of the central coast's farm land into flooded disaster areas. More than 200 small, mostly Hispanic strawberry growers in Monterey County were among those devastated by losses. Unlike larger growers, they lacked the financial resources to rebuild their operations and faced financial ruin — until FSA stepped in.

FSA helped over 100 of these Hispanic farmers in the Salinas and Pajaro valleys with emergency loans, aiding them in restoring their land and planting new crops. To expedite applications, bilingual staff members visited applicants' farms and detailed 45 employees from around the country to help process claims.

"These growers faced losing their livelihood," says Jim Gordon of La Cooperativa Campesina de California, a state-wide nonprofit group representing farm worker organizations. "Most could not qualify for loans and those who could faced exorbitant fees and interest charges. But FSA really came through, offering loans at very reasonable rates."

Since the disaster, the FSA staff in California has made a number of changes to meet Hispanic farmers' needs, including hiring a state outreach coordinator. The Monterey County CED, Vivian Soffa, actually learned Spanish, becoming fluent enough to teach a financial record-keeping class to Hispanic producers. The Monterey office also added permanent bilingual staff members, and now prints its newsletter and FSA program fact sheets in Spanish.

Jim Gordon is impressed: "FSA's made a real effort to communicate with and be sensitive to the specific needs of these small growers."

The Hispanic Growers Unite Through a Business

With FSA's help, the strawberry growers regained financial stability and were able to turn their attention to creating strength and equity for themselves.

They wanted to lessen their vulnerability to disasters such as the flood and the struggle often associated with being small, individual farmers. The Hispanic growers, whose holdings total over 6,000 acres, developed a plan for a business alliance — a company of sufficient size to compete effectively for supermarket and export business. Gordon, supported by La Cooperativa, spearheaded the effort and helped convince the Hispanic farmers that they could become competitive in a field dominated by a few giant companies.

By the end of 1997, 20 growers had committed to the company, which they named Union Sweet. All the members have a minimum of five years experience producing high quality strawberries, and each has pledged \$12,500 in voting stock. To back the emerging business, Gordon raised an additional \$12.5 million in private sector capital.

Now, rather than relying on a shipper-broker, Union Sweet members arrange their own financing and land leases. They purchase their own plants, pesticides, fertilizers, and shipping supplies at wholesale prices. Union Sweet members now can sell their products themselves, eliminating the frustration of waiting and hoping for a fair price.



These strawberries from the Salinas area are on their way to Japan.

Currently, Union Sweet growers farm seven percent of California's strawberry acreage. This season they anticipate selling 7.5 million trays of fresh market strawberries and 20 million frozen pounds. By 1999, they anticipate farming 1,700 acres in the Watsonville-Salinas area, and they plan to expand to other growing areas to effectively compete in the domestic and international marketplace.

Union Sweet's success goes beyond merely bringing prosperity to its members. The business supplies fresh drinking water and washing facilities for its workers. It supports the rights of employees to organize and work in an environment free of discrimination and sexual harassment. In addition, Union Sweet will have a continuing education program and standardized methods for workers. All this, according to Gordon, will achieve one goal — "The Union Sweet brand name will signify a high quality, safe, and healthy product."

Mother Nature Turns Ugly

When it comes to weather, the lower 48 had it rough this year. And many of our fellow FSA employees found out about natural disasters first hand, working on the front lines to help customers get back on their feet.

In eastern New Mexico, a six-day snow storm hit in late December, resulting in substantial snowfall, ice, freezing temperatures, and high winds. The severe storm stranded over 184,000 head of livestock in twelve New Mexico counties for up to 15 days. New Mexico FSA personnel dropped hay out of airplanes to feed thousands of head of snowbound cattle, sheep, and other livestock. Administrator Kelly toured the disaster area by helicopter and helped throw hay out the door on a drop mission. Kelly also helped publicize the Foundation Livestock Relief Program (FLRP) using interviews with local TV, radio, and newspapers.

New Mexico FSA personnel served as the main contact for all agricultural related calls from ranchers, farmers, county commissioners, agricultural businesses, news media, and congressional representatives. FSA provided FLRP assistance to 371 livestock producers and also approved five emergency loans.

Tornadoes, heavy rains, and severe flooding have made 84 percent of Florida's counties eligible for federal assistance since December 1997. And the misery is not over yet. The state's Division of Emergency Management says that with river levels beginning to recede across the state and warmer weather expected in May and June, populations of night-flying disease-carrying mosquitos promise to skyrocket. Florida's SED, Kevin Kelley, says FSA is still assessing agricultural losses and the effect on FSA loan programs. So far, six counties are eligible for emergency loan assistance.



Flooding of the Choctawahatchee River in Southeast Alabama.

In January, an ice storm blanketed the northeast, hitting maple and fruit orchards hard. The storm flattened trees, collapsed farm structures, and snapped power lines. In Clinton County, New York, FSA personnel Don LaPierre, Cindy Dominy, and Nancy Charles rolled up their sleeves and went to work helping their neighbors. They spent long hours working at a local emergency center, hand delivering generators, and hunting down electricians for blacked-out farms. They also worked with FarmNet, a farmer-oriented counseling service, to help farm families cope with the disaster. And their help was greatly appreciated. Across the northeast, residents expressed their thanks to relief workers with signs lining rural highways.

In California, torrential rain and flooding in February caused the governor to declare a state of emergency in 31 counties and inflicted damage to an estimated 90,700 acres so far. The water cost farmers \$78.5 million in crop losses, and the damage to livestock, poultry, and farm facilities totals

\$23.6 million. California FSA staff members put in overtime to quickly survey the losses and offer ECP funds to help restore fields and irrigation structures. The California state office estimates it obligated about \$4.9 million in cost-sharing ECP funds, primarily in the southern coastal counties.

Alabama suffered too. In March, excessive rain and flooding hit the southeast part of the state, causing extensive damage to property, farm structures, and roads in ten counties. In some locations, as much as 12 inches of rain fell in a 24-hour period. The downtown area of Elba in Coffee County was flooded to a depth of 6 feet when a levee on the Pea River gave way under massive amounts of water. David Eaddy, Coffee County's CED, came through, spending countless hours flying in a helicopter with a local team to assess the extent of erosion damage to cropland, pastures, and farm ponds. Southeast Alabama's agricultural losses include 89,000 acres of flooded land worth an estimated \$4 million and another million in damaged farm structures and

continued on next page

machinery. Crop losses so far include 5,350 acres of rye, wheat, oats, and corn. Eight counties have requested assistance under ECP.

Areas such as the Upper Midwest and Alaska had mild winters. But, as Frank Richard, a hydrologist for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) points out, no one should become complacent because their area hasn't been hit yet — weather can change suddenly. So FSA employees should, as usual, be prepared for anything.

Can we blame El Niño?

Is the recent rash of severe weather El Niño's fault? Experts differ on this. The current El Niño is the strongest observed in 50 years, but while El Niños affect worldwide weather patterns, they only play a part. We can observe seasonal El Niño patterns, but can't accurately blame any particular storm or flood on one. And seasonal El Niño weather patterns can vary during a particular year, making forecasting difficult and impacts variable.

Experts do agree that we can pin some responsibility on El Niño because in the winter El Niños have a measurable and substantial impact on global weather. And this winter's El Niño followed the typical U.S. pattern of above average temperatures across the north and higher rainfall levels in the south. El Niño or not, the weather's kept FSA employees busy.

If the days seemed longer recently, El Niño might be the culprit. Because the atmosphere sped up during El Niño, the Earth slowed down to compensate. February 5 was the longest day of all, a whole 0.6 milliseconds above normal, and the cumulative increase since El Niño began late last year amounts to about a tenth of a second — the time it takes to blink.

The outlook for spring and summer

It's harder to predict El Niño's impact after winter. During springtime, the relationship between El Niño and North American weather patterns breaks down, providing few clues about the climate. Effects in the spring normally include drier than average conditions from the Ohio Valley to the Mid-Atlantic states, milder than normal temperatures in the central states, and warm temperatures from the northern Great Plains westward. Cooler weather and recurring periods of significant storm activity are predicted over much of the southern U.S. NOAA expects continued wet weather in California and across the southeastern U.S. through early summer.

The threat of flooding depends on whether the rainfall spreads out in duration and has a chance to run off, or is concentrated in a short period of time. NOAA forecasts that warm waters in the Pacific will begin to return to normal cooler temperatures in the summer and early autumn.

Unusual weather conditions like El Niño and the excessive moisture associated with it can significantly hurt agricultural production. But it's important to note that this influence can be less dramatic or even non-existent depending on the timing, duration, and intensity of El Niño-related events at various stages of crop development.



One-ton hay bales being loaded on C-130 plane, in preparation of hay drop in New Mexico



Ice collects on trees in St. Lawrence County, New York

As Bob Stefanski, an agricultural meteorologist with USDA's World Agricultural Outlook Board puts it, "We can't effectively predict El Niño effects on climate and crops. There might just be slight variations this season if we get timely rain — and it's difficult to forecast that."

FOOD FACT: The biggest hamburger on record weighed 2.5 tons (5,520 lbs.) and was 21 feet in diameter. It was cooked at the Outagamie County Fairgrounds in Seymour WI on August 5, 1989.

Louisiana FSA Office Helps Fulfill a Dream

by Dawn Kral, Public Affairs Staff

John Jenkins' wish recently became reality, thanks to the help of Louisiana's DeSoto Parish County FSA office.

Mr. Jenkins, a lifelong resident of DeSoto Parish, worked at local dairies for most of his life and wanted to operate his own dairy farm for almost as long. He feared that lack of funding would stand between him and his goal — but the picture changed for him in 1997. While visiting with a county committee member who is also a dairyman, he spoke of his dream.

The committee member contacted the local FSA office to discuss Jenkins' ambition. Soon after, CED Dale Ford and Ag Credit Manager Mike Sullivan met with Jenkins to help him locate land and cattle, and worked with him, local dairymen, and Extension Service dairy specialists to develop a plan of operation to allow Jenkins to receive an FSA loan.

"We've never worked with a potential applicant who's received as much support from other local farmers as Mr. Jenkins has," said Ford. "A number of farmers asked us to assist John if we possibly could, and offered to help him get started if needed."

Jenkins' new farm is one of just seven minority-operated dairies in Louisiana, a state with 581 dairies in 1997. "FSA cannot ensure John's success, but can help provide the resources he needs," said Sullivan. "John has worked hard, and with help and encouragement, we think he's well on his way."

This is just one example of how FSA strives to work with local communities, helping potentially successful farmers reach their goals.

If you have a story about how your state or county office helped someone realize a dream, we'd like to know. See the editorial box on page 2 for contact information.



CED Dale Ford (left) and Ag Credit Manager Mike Sullivan discuss loan closing requirements with applicant John Jenkins (seated).



CED Visits Namesake: Two years ago, Chuck Anderson, CED of the Aitkin-Itasca County, MN, FSA office visited the farm of Colleen and Phil Chute to conduct a routine conservation spot-check. While there, he was nearly toppled by a feisty, 1,000-lb. Holstein heifer enjoying her first taste of freedom after escaping a confinement area.

Anderson wound up in a ditch while helping to rein in the bounding bovine, who had a calf later that Spring which the Chutes named "Chuck." Pictured are the Chutes and Anderson with "Chuck the Cow" and her firstborn calf.

FSA Goes Over the Top in USDA Food Drive

Secretary Glickman presented FSA Administrator Keith Kelly with a plaque recognizing the agency for its overwhelming response to the USDA food drive. FSA collected 277,628 pounds of food, more than twice its goal of 100,000 pounds.

"I'm very proud of the way FSA team members put their hearts and souls into this effort," said Kelly. "It's just one more example of the way our people go the extra mile in everything."

USDA's Department-wide food drive, which ran from January 7 to February 13, was part of Secretary Glickman's Anti-Hunger and Nutrition Initiative. The initiative aims to increase food recovery 33 percent by the year 2000, enough additional food to feed 450,000 people a day.

FSA's headquarters staff raised 2,176 pounds of food by hosting a variety of creative events to collect food and cash contributions for the D.C. Capital Area Food Bank. Events included a luncheon featuring chili, another offering Louisiana red beans and rice, and a pre-Valentines Day bake sale.

One employee singlehandedly collected 40 pounds of donated food by offering donors pieces of her homemade fudge.

Members of FSA field offices responded just as enthusiastically. With the help of producers and agribusinesses, the agency's field staff raised 275,452 pounds of food for donation to food pantries, churches, homeless shelters, and soup kitchens across the country.

Among the Agency's many outstanding efforts, Pennsylvania employees, working with farm organizations such as the Grange, Farmers Union, and Farm Bureau, collected nearly 12 tons of food for a Harrisburg shelter program. New Mexico staff and volunteers

collected 100,000 pounds of potatoes for 30 Navajo Nation chapters. Members in Kansas City collected over 20,616 pounds of food, including apples from the orchard of a generous farmer.



Grady Bilberry and Rebecca Harrington flank Parks Shackelford, Assistant Deputy Administrator for Farm Programs, with some of the food collected by Farm Programs personnel. Parks was instrumental in organizing a luncheon featuring homemade venison stroganoff to collect food donations.

State Executive Directors (SED) National Conference

FSA's SEDs visited Washington, D.C. March 24-27 to hear from Secretary Glickman, Deputy Secretary Rominger, Under Secretary Schumacher, and FSA Administrator Kelly and his deputies on administrative convergence, service center issues, outreach, field delivery, and other departmental initiatives.

Kelly expressed his commitment to empower state level management with authority and flexibility on decision-making, also emphasizing the accountability that accompanies this empowerment. Forum discussions reaffirmed the importance of County Office Committee Advisors and food gleaning efforts. Kelly asked the state

leaders to continue to identify programmatic barriers to customer service.

Additionally, the state leaders for FSA, NRCS, and RD met for one day for a briefing on important issues facing USDA, USDA's National Food and Agriculture Council, and field service centers. It was a great opportunity for agency leaders from all states to discuss the challenges they face delivering USDA's programs.



Secretary Glickman speaks at the SED National Conference, March 24.

California FSA Reaches Out to Under-Served Producers



California's diversity of produce is well-known. Farmers grow more than 350 commercial crops in the state, and for 50 years California has been the nation's top agricultural producer. What may not be as well understood is the increasing diversity of California's farmers. There are more Latino, Hmong, Asian, African American, East Indian, and Native American farmers than ever before.

This shift has increased the need and desire to reach all producers. California FSA staff members have been diligently increasing their ability to communicate and market FSA's services to all facets of the farming population. They're also improving the efficiency and timeliness of producer services. California's energetic outreach efforts are designed to increase participation in FSA programs at all levels. Efforts include:

- Under Secretary Gus Schumacher met with 100 Hmong farmers in Fresno, including touring three

farms producing crops such as strawberries, lemon grass, and sugar peas.

- The Salinas office developed a Spanish-speaking tour attended by 40 mainly Hispanic producers, designed to showcase farm operations that typify success in all aspects of crop production. This office also conducted a record-keeping course for farmers, attended by 37 Hispanic farmers.
- California has increased by 300 percent the level of Minority Advisor representation on California County Committees.
- The FSA office in Fresno hired its first Hmong-speaking loan packager in January. Another effort in Fresno involves weekly radio program information broadcast in Hmong.

These are only some of the efforts California has developed to meet their underserved producers' changing needs, and they continue to improve their ability to deliver services to ALL producers.

An Update on the FSA Organizational Climate Survey

An outstanding 63% of us completed FSA's employee survey last fall, indicating a strong employee interest in civil rights policies. Pending analysis by an independent contractor, Administrator Kelly looks forward to sharing with employees a comprehensive report on results and recommendations by mid-June. Mr. Kelly is committed to considering employees' views in the survey and making any appropriate changes to existing procedures.



Under Secretary Gus Schumacher on a Hmong-operated farm in Fresno, California, March 12. This was a tour set up by Hmong-run cooperatives to showcase their farms and crop

FOOD FACT: Ice-cream cones were invented at the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair by an ice-cream vendor who ran out of dishes and substituted waffles from a nearby waffle maker.