

Farmers Helping Farmers

Okanogan County

FSA committee crucial to federal program success

“Helping farmers that come to me with questions about FSA has been the biggest motivation to serve on the committee.”- Okanogan County Committee Member Victor Castro.

Victor Castro came to the United States from Mexico in the mid-1970s and started working in the fruit industry in the Wenatchee area. After years of working in warehouses and orchards, he decided it was time to strike out on his own.

An opportunity for an apple orchard opened up near Tonasket, in Okanogan County. With some equipment purchased from earlier endeavors he applied for and received a Farm Service Agency-backed guaranteed loan to purchase the land in 1997.

Now 14 years later, Castro has ripped out all the apple trees and replanted three cherry varieties and pears. As he farmed and became a part of the Tonasket area, Castro decided to try to better the community by running for the FSA Okanogan County Committee. He recently started his second term on the committee.

“Serving on the committee has been a great way for me to get involved and learn about FSA programs,” Castro said. “It has

helped me give information to the Hispanic grower community.”

The FSA county committee system provides a unique federal government experience: farmers and ranchers are elected by their peers to help FSA administer farm programs and provide an important source of information.

Committee members can serve a maximum of three consecutive three-year terms. Castro serves as an advisor for the committee, representing Hispanic interests in the region. The county committee consists of fruit, grain and livestock producers as well as producers of different ethnicities.

The FSA has a two-pronged mission: on one side it oversees a portfolio of programs dealing with disaster assistance, conservation practices, and revenue assistance. The agency also makes loans to farmers and ranchers for annual operating



Okanogan County FSA Committee member Victor Castro.

expenses, purchasing or expanding agricultural operations and emergency loans to repair natural disaster damage.

The three-to-five person committees are the place that producers can appeal most agency decisions. Committees also make decisions which help to determine program payments. The committees meet approximately once a month. Voting in the election helps guarantee the committee is knowledgeable and truly represents the agricultural producers in each county.

Working with Hispanic and other minority growers has been a high-point for Castro. For various reasons, Castro said that Hispanic growers can find them-

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selves out of the loop on program information or changing form requirements. Being on the committee and learning more about the agency has allowed Castro to educate his fellow producers and help keep them up-to-date on requirements and changes.

Each county committee draws its members from local administrative areas. Counties are broken up into administrative areas for the purposes of voting. Local

administrative areas encompass similar agriculture or geographic areas. Nominated by local farmers and ranchers, candidates must live in the county or local administrative area they will represent and must be eligible to vote in the county election. Members serve on staggered three-year terms so that one-third of the seats is up for reelection each year. Producers can serve for nine years. After more than 70 years, the county committee structure remains a cornerstone of FSA's efforts to

preserve and promote American agriculture, said Gary Breiler, Okanogan County FSA Executive Director.

"Helping farmers that come to me with questions about FSA has been the biggest motivation to serve on the committee," Castro said. "It's been a great opportunity."