

## **News Release**

For Immediate Release

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### **FSA To Close Offices – Public Meetings Scheduled**

*Bozeman*— For the past several months the USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA) has been faced with the challenge of reviewing the organizational structure of the agency to meet the needs of a changing agricultural industry and to deliver programs to meet those needs. FSA must compete for a decreasing federal appropriation which severely impacts the amount of staff maintained to deliver programs, which in turn impacts the level of service to Montana producers. An intra-agency task force consisting of employees from the FSA state and county offices, as well as representatives from the FSA state and county committees analyzed statistical data involving program delivery and the impairment of service to producers to develop a restructuring plan.

The plan includes:

- The closure of six FSA offices across Montana including Lewis and Clark, Meagher, Park, Sanders, Sweet Grass, and Treasure. These offices will be consolidated with neighboring counties. The consolidation of the Ravalli/Missoula offices is also planned but will be delayed for 9-12 months to gather additional information on which office should remain open.
- Producers affected by an office closure will have the choice to do business with any office in a contiguous county.
- Re-distribution of staff to be placed in offices where workload is the highest. The consolidation of offices would increase staffing levels of employees statewide.
- Employee retention. No FSA employee will be forced out of employment due to a consolidation action. In the six offices targeted for immediate closure, there are seven employees affected. All employees will be offered employment in the receiving office of the closure.
- FSA presence in closed counties during a transition period will be maintained.
- Improvement of service provided remotely through phone, fax, mail, e-mail and web-based processes and the client's level of comfort in doing business in this manner.
- Working with the National FSA office to simplify forms and participation processes in writing easy-to-understand instructions, improving web-based processes, and improving public information dissemination to assist participants in understanding FSA programs.

“If FSA in Montana is able to maintain current staffing numbers, one way to improve efficiency is to reduce the number of offices among which that staff needs to be distributed, stated Randy Johnson, State Executive Director. “Redistributing the staff allows us to better utilize our employees and serve our clients.”

FSA must balance commitment to our customers with our responsibility to make efficient use of American tax dollars. The reorganization plan embraces that responsibility to be more fiscally conscious and efficient, while at the same time not losing sight of those served by FSA programs.

“I understand there will be individual producers who feel they will be adversely affected by spending extra funds and time to travel to another office” stated Johnson. “As State Executive Director I am dedicated to maintaining service to these folks and pledge to do whatever it takes to give them the opportunity to participate in our programs. We can utilize office hours in closed offices, use mail, email, phone, fax and the web when appropriate, or hold signup meetings in remote locations. We need to continue making participation in our programs easier and prepare to meet new challenges in the future.”

Public meetings to discuss the office closures are being scheduled for the 1<sup>st</sup> week of October. The meetings will be held in the six immediately affected counties. Meetings will be scheduled for: Plains on October 1<sup>st</sup> at 2:00 p.m.; Helena on October 2<sup>nd</sup> at 9:00 a.m.; White Sulpher Springs on October 2<sup>nd</sup> at 2:00 p.m.; Livingston on October 3<sup>rd</sup> at 9:00 a.m.; Big Timber on October 3<sup>rd</sup> at 2:00 p.m.; and Hysham on October 4<sup>th</sup> at 10:00 a.m. Meeting locations will be released when arrangements have been finalized.

Following the public meetings, the agency will submit a final plan to the Farm Service Agency Deputy Administrator for Field Operations and the National Food and Agriculture Committee (NFAC). After approval by the NFAC, the State FSA will be authorized to begin the consolidation of the offices. Congress does require a 120 day waiting period after the date on which the Secretary of Agriculture notifies the House Committee on Agriculture, the House Committee on Appropriations, the Senate Committee on Agriculture, the Senate Committee on Appropriations and Montana’s Congressional Delegation before the offices can actually be closed.

Details on Montana’s restructuring plan and office closures as well as background information can be found on the Montana FSA website at <http://www.fsa.usda.gov/mt> under the “I Want To Section”. Click on the link titled “Learn more about FSA’s office closure”.

The current FSA was originally organized during the dust bowl days of the 1930’s as the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA) to provide financial assistance to farmers and ranchers. To learn more about programs administered by FSA in Montana, logon to the Montana FSA website at <http://www.fsa.usda.gov/mt>.