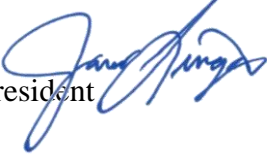




Missouri Association of FSA County Office Employees

TO: Missouri Farm Service Agency
Kimberly Viers
Acting State Executive Director

FROM: Jared Singer 
MASCOE President

SUBJECT: MASCOE Consultation with Missouri FSA Management

The MASCOE Executive Committee looks forward to meeting with you on Thursday, June 22, 2017, at 10:00 a.m. to discuss employee concerns regarding Missouri's recent review of the Conservation Reserve Program.

It is of the utmost importance to us that this meeting facilitates improved program delivery through a dialogue of mutual respect and understanding. MASCOE appreciates the historically positive rapport we have had with FSA management in Missouri, and looks forward to an ongoing working relationship to benefit all stakeholders.

Attached are the major points we would like to discuss. Please let me know if we can provide any further information prior to our meeting. We intend to distribute the attached document, with your responses included, to membership following our meeting.

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Note: The meeting was originally planned for June 22, 2017, but due to scheduling conflicts occurred July 18, 2017.

Item 1 – Execution and Communication of CRP Review and STO Concerns**Issue/Concern**

The execution and communication of the CRP contract review process and identified deficiencies, initiated in an email dated March 1, 2017, would have been more effective with a collaborative tone of shared responsibility and mutual commitment to improvement moving forward.

MASCOE Position

Based on feedback MASCOE has received, many county office employees felt the communications surrounding this issue had an accusatory and demeaning tone which over-generalized some of the causes of the issues discovered.

MASCOE feels it is important for STO leadership to reflect on the recent CRP review process and communication provided to county offices, and consider how a similar situation could be handled more effectively in the future, as well as what actions the STO could have taken in an attempt to prevent the situation from occurring at all. MASCOE feels that, generally speaking, county office employees are doing the best job possible with the tools and resources available. Furthermore, employees are not purposely failing or providing inaccurate or incorrect information. In many county offices, a formal CRP review has not been conducted in many years, and many new CRP program technicians have been brought on without any formal training. The issues found in the initial state office review appear to have been considered widespread but, in fact, were not caused by statewide efforts to defraud the program or disobey policy.

MASCOE understands there were issues regarding CRP that needed to be addressed, and MASCOE has no concern with that. However, MASCOE feels the approach taken by the STO could have been more effective and professional. At all levels of the agency, professionalism, courtesy, and shared responsibility for successes and failures, increases employee satisfaction and engagement in ensuring agency goals and objectives are met.

STC Response

See attached STC response

Agreement

MASCOE accepts the STC response

Item 3 – Lack of effective GPS equipment and training**Issue/Concern**

The current expectations set forth by the state office regarding accurate field measurements with regards to adjusting CRP boundaries are unrealistic based on the fact that very few county offices have had the necessary training and have access to proper tools and equipment to complete this task. Lack of access to high resolution imagery in GIS systems while reviewing field boundaries also contributes to reduced accuracy.

MASCOE Position

The main GPS unit used by FSA staff is a Garmin GPSmap76. Typically, this tool will not achieve less than 10 feet accuracy without use of an automated differential beacon receiver (backpack). As this technology becomes increasingly outdated, the reliability and accuracy of the tool no longer meets handbook regulations. Still, in many cases, this is the only tool available for county office staff to use, so field measurements are often inaccurate.

A newer Trimble unit was introduced to the state in 2015, but only 1 unit is available in each district, making it very difficult to coordinate to ensure each office has access to it as needed, which is becoming more and more frequent. With these new units, typically only 4 to 5 feet accuracy can be achieved on a clear day in an open area of a field, not along a tree line or stream bank, which is often where the GPS points are needed to adjust field borders.

In both cases, many employees, including CEDs, have not had the proper training, if any, to use these tools. Furthermore, the GPS points that are gathered in the field often do not align with FSA's mapping system, creating discrepancies between the mapped field boundaries and "accurate" GPS points taken with the Garmin. It is extremely difficult to then explain violations, and enforce penalties, to producers without having concrete, accurate evidence to support the findings.

If the expectation is that staff will continue to use the Garmin units to collect GPS points for field measurements, then extensive training, both on the equipment and software, needs to be provided to both CEDs and county office staff, and units that are in need of repair or replacement are handled promptly. A more formal, efficient process needs to be established for use of the newer Trimble units to ensure all offices have adequate, timely access.

MASCOE understands that national level staff are aware of the GIS imagery issue and hope to improve it. The main point is ensuring the STO is aware these challenges are contributing factors to the issues brought to light in the recent CRP review.

STC Response

See attached STC response

Agreement

MASCOE accepts the STC response.

