UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
Farm Service Agency
Washington, DC 20250

Notice AO-1572

For: State and County Offices

2013 COC Nominations and Election

Approved by: Acting Deputy Administrator, Field Operations

1 Overview

A Background

COC elections provide farmers and ranchers the opportunity to represent producers in their community by serving on their local FSA COC. All farmers and ranchers are encouraged to consider running for COC seats.

Significant emphasis continues to be placed on improving diversity on COC's. FSA is working diligently to increase the number of SDA farmers and ranchers nominated for COC using FSA-669A. State and County Offices have actively and successfully been able to place many more SDA candidates' names on ballots. Efforts must be continued and expanded to ensure that SDA farmers and ranchers have every opportunity for election to FSA COC's.

FSA must also continue working on encouraging voters to look to beginning farmers and ranchers as a source for nominees of COC elections. COC's and County Office employees must reach out to beginning farmers and ranchers with information and encouragement to run for a seat on COC. Beginning farmer contacts should include, but not be limited to, County Extension educators and high school and college instructors.

Publicity and outreach efforts must be directed to all producers, with special emphasis on SDA and beginning farmers and ranchers. Every means must be used to contact organizations whose members consist of SDA farmers and ranchers, as these organizations have the opportunity to nominate farmers and ranchers for candidacy to COC's.

Not only must COC's and County Office employees encourage producers to submit FSA-669A's, they must strongly encourage all voters to return their voted ballots after selecting the candidate of their choice. Historically, about 13 percent of the ballots mailed were voted and returned. On average, 2 million ballots are mailed annually, so there is great opportunity for a candidate to be elected if only a small percentage increase in voted and returned ballots is realized.

Disposal Date	Distribution
January 1, 2014	State Offices; State Offices relay to County Offices

1 Overview (Continued)

B Purpose

This notice:

- instructs STC's, COC's, County Offices, Outreach Coordinators, and State Office staff responsible for COC elections to:

  - ensure that **mailing address are up-to-date in SCIMS**

  - **ensure that correct LAA's are identified for the election**

    Note: Elections held in the wrong LAA's result in added expenses in time and money for the Agency. It is the joint responsibility of the CED and COC in every office to accurately identify the correct LAA up for election each year. See 15-AO, subparagraph 79 A for guidance.

  - begin publicizing LAA's up for election according to subparagraph E and 15-AO, paragraphs 42 and 42.5

  - complete the County Office Committee (COC) Election Postcard Information Screen on the COC Election web site

    Note: Producers in LAA's selected will receive postcards instead of FSA-669A according to 15-AO, subparagraph 107 B.

  - ensure that County Offices begin accepting FSA-669A's for COC elections

    Note:FSA-669A's may be accepted any time before the opening of the nomination period.

  - be informed of the 2013 COC election schedule (Exhibit 1)

    Note: Election reminder postcards that were sent 2 weeks after the ballots were mailed will no longer be sent to producers by the contractor or County Offices.

- **obsoletes** Notice AO-1571 to correct the date that SED's and STC's are required to begin providing assistance to County Offices that have not received any FSA-669A's.

1 Overview (Continued)

C SDA Farmer or Rancher Representation on COC's

An SDA farmer, rancher, or agricultural producer is a member of a group whose members have been subjected to racial, ethnic, or gender prejudice because of his or her identity as a member of the group without regard to his or her individual qualities. SDA groups include women, African Americans, American Indians, Hispanics, Asian Americans, and Pacific Islanders.

To increase representation of SDA farmers and ranchers on COC's, FSA **requires** County Offices and COC's to do the following:

- actively solicit and accept FSA-669A's from producers and groups representing SDA producers in the COC jurisdiction before close of the nomination period

- provide organizations representing SDA groups with detailed information during the nomination period about the process and opportunity to nominate candidates using FSA-669A during the nomination period

  Notes: Record, in COC minutes **and** Outreach Tracking and Information System (OTIS), the names of SDA groups contacted and information that was provided to them.

  Organizations representing SDA farmers and ranchers may file FSA-669A's.

- place informational posters and fact sheets in public buildings, churches, and businesses serving SDA producers.

D Beginning Farmer or Rancher Representation on COC's

To encourage representation of beginning farmers and ranchers on COC's, FSA **requires** County Offices and COC's to:

- actively solicit completed FSA-669A's from producers who are beginning farmers or ranchers

- provide organizations whose membership is made up of or includes beginning farmers and ranchers with detailed information about the COC election process

- provide high schools and colleges with informational posters and fact sheets.

1 Overview (Continued)

E Publicizing Elections

FSA National, State, and County Offices shall:

- provide COC fact sheets and posters to producer organizations, community-based organizations, tribal governments, local NIFA offices, organizations representing SDA groups, young farmer and rancher organizations, and land grant institutions

- ensure that all producers are adequately and timely informed about COC nomination and election procedures including all nomination and election deadlines and dates

  Note: County Offices and COC's shall begin extensive COC election outreach activities immediately.

- place special emphasis on providing COC nomination and election information to SDA groups representing minority and female farmers and ranchers and organizations that have beginning farmers as members

- post maps that clearly identify LAA boundaries and LAA's conducting elections in the Service Center and in public locations

- ensure FSA-669A's are available on the counter at each FSA County Office

- distribute information to eligible producers on how to obtain FSA-669A's by completing the County Office Committee (COC) Election Postcard Information Screen on the COC Election web site.

  Note: Postcards will be mailed to producers in identified LAA's by a printing company at no expense to State Offices. Exhibit 2 provides example wording.

Publicize:

- the **http://www.fsa.usda.gov/elections** web site and inform the public that for:

  - FSA-669A, scroll down to the links under "Election Materials" and CLICK "**2013 Nomination Form**"

  - fact sheets, scroll down to the links under "Fact Sheets"

    Note: FSA-669A in English and Spanish is also available at **http://intranet.fsa.usda.gov/FSA** for employee access.

- COC nomination and election information in newsletters, public service announcements, broadcast and print media, inserts in office mailings, or any other means of communication.

2 Action (Continued)

A SED, STC, and State Outreach Coordinator Action

SED's and STC's shall ensure that all State- and local-level organizations whose members include SDA farmers and ranchers are contacted and informed of the upcoming COC nominations and elections. NIFA offices and local groups, and organizations that serve beginning farmers and ranchers, shall be provided COC nomination and election information.

SED's, in consultation with State outreach coordinators or designees, shall require each COC to develop and submit their outreach plans to SED through planned outreach activities entered in OTIS, **by June 17, 2013**. The Strategic Outreach Plan in OTIS and the supporting listing of outreach activities serve as each office's plan to ensure that all producers are adequately informed of the COC nomination and election processes. The planned outreach activities, including a list of all partner organizations involved, shall be entered into OTIS at the County Office level. Activity types to be used for COC outreach may include, but are **not** limited to, the following:

- broadcast and print media
- conferences
- meetings
- newsletters, etc.

Planned COC election outreach activities must specifically promote COC elections outside of the Service Center, and identify in OTIS how elections will be promoted. After activities are entered, the COC Election Outreach Plan is populated with the activities and is available from the "Generate a Report" section of OTIS. County Offices are instructed to review the COC Election Outreach Report to ensure that the planned activities provide a complete and accurate description of COC elections outreach efforts for the year for their office.

Note: Each County Office plan **must** include methods for targeting SDA farmers and ranchers.

Each office's overall COC Election Outreach Plan includes the following items from OTIS:

- State Strategic Outreach Plan that includes the goal to improve public awareness and promote diversity of FSA COC election process

  Note: The State Strategic Outreach Plan is available in OTIS. County Offices are not required to complete a new one.

- planned activities listed in the COC Election Outreach Plan

- list of partner organizations as of the date of printing.

Note: These items shall be retained together in each office as the official COC Election Outreach Plan for 2013. They may be retained electronically in a shared folder to save paper and storage space. To do this, a folder must be created on users State/county shared drive in which these items can be stored and easily accessed by anyone in the State or County Office, as needed.

2 Action (Continued)

A SED, STC, and State Outreach Coordinator Action (Continued)

SED's and STC's shall ensure that all County Offices complete the County Office Committee (COC) Election Postcard Information Screen on the COC Election web site as described in subparagraph D according to the timeframe established in Exhibit 1. The Postcard Information Report is available in the State AO Reports to allow State Offices to provide the oversight to ensure counties have entered their postcard information and LAA's chosen to receive postcards.

SED's and STC's shall closely monitor each County Office to ensure that at least one FSA-669A is received for each LAA up for election **before** the end of the nomination period. If a County Office has received no FSA-669A's by **July 24, 2013**, SED's and STC members will:

- review the County Office's outreach efforts
- use personal contacts with the following:
    - eligible producers to encourage nomination of themselves or others
    - Partner Organizations to enlist their assistance in providing an eligible nominee.

State outreach coordinators shall:

- take an active role in contacting representatives of SDA groups to provide COC nomination and election information
- ensure that representatives of SDA groups fully understand the responsibilities of COC's and COC nomination and election processes
- cooperate with and provide outreach assistance to County Offices and COC's
- ensure that County Offices enter all meetings and conferences for COC election outreach in OTIS
- ensure that each County Office has entered all partner organizations contacted in OTIS no later than **August 1, 2013**

  Note: Each Partner Organization only needs to be listed once, even if contacted by multiple counties.

- provide the Partner Organizations and Contacts Report and COC Outreach Report from OTIS to SED.

2 Action (Continued)

B COC Action

COC's, with the assistance of CED's and County Office staff, shall **immediately** develop an election outreach plan to inform all producers of the upcoming COC nomination and election processes and dates. Planned activities **must** specifically promote COC elections **outside of the Service Center,** and identify in OTIS how elections will be promoted. After activities are entered, the COC Election Outreach Plan is populated with the activities and is available from the Generate a Report section of OTIS. County Offices must generate their report and review it to ensure that the planned activities provide a complete and accurate COC Election Outreach Plan.

COC's shall ensure the following are retained together in the County Office:

- State Strategic Outreach Plan (available in OTIS)
- COC Election Outreach Plans
- list of partner organizations.

They may be retained electronically in a shared folder to save paper and storage space. To do this, a folder must be created on the county/state shared drive, in which these items can be stored and easily accessed by employees as needed.

Note: Each County Office plan **must** include methods for targeting SDA farmers and ranchers.

COC's shall take specific actions to ensure that:

- **correct LAA's are holding elections**

  Note: Elections held in the wrong LAA's result in added expenses in time and money for FSA. It is the joint responsibility of CED and COC in every County Office to accurately identify the correct LAA's up for election each year. See 15-AO, subparagraph 79 A for guidance.

- minority and female organizations in the COC jurisdiction are contacted and informed of the COC nomination and election processes

- organizations whose membership include beginning farmers and ranchers are provided nomination and election information

- FSA-669A's are available at the counter for producers requesting FSA-669A's

- all eligible voters are recorded correctly in SCIMS and the producer election data file, according to Notice AO-1570

2 Action (Continued)

B COC Action (Continued)

- all eligible voters listed in LAA's conducting elections are notified of nomination and election dates and procedure

- deceased producers are marked **not** eligible to vote in the Producer Election data file on the COC Election web site.

COC's and/or employees shall:

- explain the duties and eligibility requirements of being a COC member to producers

- place emphasis on obtaining SDA and beginning farmer or rancher nominees

- enter meetings and conferences for COC election outreach in OTIS

- enter all partner organizations contacted in OTIS, if not already entered

- make every effort to obtain nominees **before** the close of the nomination period, **August 1, 2013**, to help ensure that alternates will be available for COC's.

  Note: Every COC election must have at least 1 nominee. County Offices will continue to conduct outreach for additional nominees until the end of the nomination period to increase voter participation and provide for alternates.

The nomination of eligible producers by voters or community-based organizations is the **only** method used to obtain candidates for COC elections. COC's are responsible for ensuring that all producers are knowledgeable about the nomination process for COC positions.

Candidate **names will not be added by COC's to FSA-669A's** after the end of the nomination period. Every effort must be made to obtain at least 1 nomination **before** the end of the nomination period.

C CED Action

CED's shall:

- **review the current COC Member Information Report with COC's to ensure that the correct LAA is identified for holding an election in 2013**

- take an active role in contacting representatives of SDA groups to solicit nominations on FSA-669A's and ensure that these groups fully understand COC's role

- be available to meet with SDA farmer and rancher groups and groups whose membership includes beginning farmers, to fully explain COC nomination and election procedures

2 Action (Continued)

C CED Action (Continued)

- locally reproduce FSA-669A's, fact sheets, and posters from FSA's Internet at **http://www.fsa.usda.gov/elections** and post them in public locations in COC jurisdictions

- distribute information to eligible producers on how to obtain FSA-669A's by completing the County Office Committee (COC) Election Postcard Information Screen on the COC Election web site according to subparagraph D

  Note: Postcards will be mailed to producers in identified LAA's by a printing company at no expense to State Offices.

- ensure that all producers are informed of all election information, including LAA's holding an election, and where to obtain FSA-669A's

- conduct informational meetings to explain the COC nomination and election processes to the public

- work with COC's to ensure that information and meetings are thoroughly publicized through all available means

- ensure that deceased producers' names are **removed** from the eligible to vote list by removing the checkmark from the eligible to vote field

- **ensure that all nominees listed on FSA-593 are recorded in SCIMS as individuals, flagged eligible to vote, and are listed in the correct COC and LAA in the Producer Election data file according to 15-AO, subparagraph 109 C**

  Note: Particular attention **must** be given to nominees who are members of entities such as trusts, estates, corporations, limited partnerships, and limited liability corporations. **Only** the eligible voting member may be a candidate. This individual **must** have an Individual Profile Record established in SCIMS according to 15-AO, subparagraph 77 D. Nominees must be on the ballot using their name **only** with no other business or entity identifier.

  Example: John Smith, Jr. or Sue L. Smith shall **not** be entered as John Smith, Jr./DBA Smith Farms, or Sue L. Smith Farms.

- send completed FSA-593 to the State Office no later than September 7 each year

- enter ballot and nominee information into COC Election web site according to dates provided in Exhibit 1.

2 Action (Continued)

D Postcard Information Screens

Postcards will be mailed to eligible voters in LAA's holding an election instead of mailing FSA-669A's to eligible voters according to 15-AO, subparagraph 107 B. Postcards will be mailed by a printing company at no expense to State Offices. CED's **must** ensure that the County Office Committee (COC) Election Postcard Information Screen on the COC Election web site is completed correctly to generate postcard mailings to eligible voters in the LAA's holding an election. If these steps are **not** completed, or the wrong LAA's are selected, **County Offices will be responsible for conducting their own postcard mailing**.

The County Office Committee (COC) Election Postcard Information Screen on the COC Election web site:

- displays the following message at the top of the County Office Committee (COC) Election Screen, "According to the Current COC Directory the Following COC and LAA Up For Election this Year"

- requires selecting COC and LAA's up for each election in 2013

  Note: COC is selected on the first screen, LAA's are selected on the next screen.

- will be available to County Offices from **May 1 through May 30, 2013**.

If COC and LAA up for election according to the COC Directory is **not** the same COC and LAA identified by COC and CED up for election, then:

- COC and CED shall follow guidance in 15-AO, subparagraph 79 A to ensure the correct LAA is selected

- State Office shall be contacted, if assistance is needed.

IF COC and LAA up for election according to the COC Directory are…	**THEN…**
correct	• select the same COC/LAA from the choices on the County Office Committee (COC) Election Screen • CLICK "**Submit**" and the message, "Transaction Completed", will be displayed • print the County Office Committee (COC) Election Screen, with the message, "Transaction Completed", and save.

2 Action (Continued)

D Postcard Information Screens (Continued)

IF COC and LAA up for election according to the COC Directory are…	THEN…
incorrect	• select the correct COC/LAA on the County Office Committee (COC) Election Screens from the choices in the drop-down menus • CLICK "**Submit**" and the message, "Transaction Completed", will be displayed • print the County Office Committee (COC) Election Screen, with the message, "Transaction Completed", and save • update the COC Directory Report with the correct term and years left in term except in COC jurisdictions that consolidated in the last year, and have lost the ability to make changes to COC 1 and COC 2 after redrawing their LAA boundary changes to 1 COC and updating the Control Table accordingly.

E FSA-669A's and COC Slate

Individuals who want to file FSA-669A's may nominate themselves or other eligible candidates. Eligible candidates may be nominated by organizations representing SDA farmers and ranchers, or by any eligible producer whose records are administered in the same COC jurisdiction.

FSA-669A:

- provides a signature block for individuals or organizations that are using FSA-669A to nominate an eligible candidate other than themselves

  Note: It is the nominator's responsibility to obtain the nominee's certification and signature **before** returning FSA-669A to the County Office.

- includes a checkbox in the Nominee's Certification block to identify write-in candidates after election results are known.

There is **no** required minimum number of eligible nominees for a COC's slate, unless there are **no** FSA-669A's filed for an LAA election. If no FSA-669A's are received, see 15-AO, paragraph 108. A separate FSA-669A **must** be used for each individual nomination. Names shall **not** be added to COC slates after the nomination period closes, if at least 1 candidate files FSA-669A. If no FSA-669A's are received in a County Office with 4 or more LAA's, COC **must** consider a reduction in LAA's before the next election to increase the pool of potential candidates.

There must be at least 1 candidate in each LAA holding an election. However, it is vital to **actively solicit more than 1 nominee** so that an alternate is available.

2 Action (Continued)

F Mailing FSA-669's

Name and address records of eligible voters in SCIMS and the COC Election web site are provided to the printing company by Kansas City. This database is used by the printer to mail FSA-669's to eligible voters in the LAA's chosen by County Office users. COC's and County Offices are responsible for ensuring that the information provided is correct. Changes made in FSA records after the data has been provided to the printing company will **not** be reflected in the name and address database used by the printer for both FSA-669's. The deadline for changes to be included in the data sent to the printing company is **September 25, 2013**. Once the data has been provided to the printer, no changes can be made, including removing or adding nominee names.

FSA-669's will be mailed to eligible voters **no later than November 4, 2013**, by the printing company.

G Contacts

If there are questions about this notice, contact either of the following:

- Deborah Johnson by either of the following:
  - e-mail at **deborah.johnson@wdc.usda.gov**
  - telephone at 202-720-0067
- Barbara Boyd by either of the following:
  - e-mail at **barbara.boyd@wdc.usda.gov**
  - telephone at 202-720-7890.

For questions about outreach activities and entering election activities in OTIS, contact Nancy Bond by either of the following:

- e-mail at **nancy.bond@wdc.usda.gov**
- telephone at 202-260-6069.

2013 COC Election Schedule

The following provides the 2013 COC election schedule.

Date	Activity
April 1, 2013	COC's and County Offices will: • ensure that the correct LAA's are identified for holding an election in 2013 by reviewing the current COC Member Information Report in the Reports section of the COC Election web site and FSA-668 • complete a review of LAA boundaries • send all LAA boundary determinations on FSA-582 to STC for approval. **Note:** COC's shall document reviews and determinations of LAA's up for election and LAA boundaries in COC minutes.
May 1 to May 30, 2013	County Offices will complete the County Office Committee (COC) Election Postcard Information Screen on the COC Election web site with LAA's up for election. Producers in LAA holding an election will receive postcards with information on how to obtain a nomination form.
May 24, 2013	STC's complete FSA-582 reviews, approve FSA-582's, and notify County Offices. **Note:** STC's shall document reviews and determinations about LAA boundaries in STC minutes.

June 3, 2013	COC's and County Offices will:
	
	• review the Current COC Member Information Report to ensure accuracy of LAA's holding elections
	
	• review eligible voter lists and verify accuracy as follows:
	
	  • remove the checkmark (✓) from the eligible to vote field in the Producer Election Data File for:
	
	  • producers who are deceased
	  • voters for whom no valid address can be obtained
	  • any entries of "Unknown"
	
	  Note: The "receive mail indicator" is overridden for COC elections. All producers' names on the Eligible Voters List will be sent a ballot.

2013 COC Election Schedule (Continued)

Date	Activity
June 3, 2013 (Continued)	• add eligible voters names by adding a checkmark (✓) to the "Eligible to Vote" field in the Producer Election data file • ensure that all eligible voters are associated with the correct COC and LAA • make an eligibility determination for producers listed on the Producers Not Associated with a COC/LAA list with a date last updated in FY 2013 that can be associated with a COC/LAA **Note:** This will remove their names from this list and place them on the eligible voters list or ineligible voters list, as designated. It is expected that there will always be names remaining on the Producers Not Associated with a COC/LAA list that cannot be associated with a COC/LAA. Counties that already removed all names that were on the list shall apply this guidance to names added in the future. • issue public notice of election and LAA boundaries. **Note:** COC's and CED's shall review LAA's holding elections and eligible voter lists for accuracy and record their determinations in COC minutes.
June 17, 2013	COC's and County Offices: • increase outreach activities to acquire nominees and fully publicize the nomination and election processes. • complete and print eligible voters list • make eligible voter lists available to the public upon request • election outreach plan is due.
July 24, 2013	SED's and STC's shall ensure that all counties have received FSA-669A and provide assistance in obtaining at least 1 nominee before the end of the nomination period where necessary.
August 1, 2013	Final date for County Offices to receive FSA-669A's or for FSA-669A's to be postmarked. County Offices begin reviewing FSA-669A's. Partner organizations contacted with election information shall be entered in OTIS.
August 8, 2013	Final date for County Office to notify State Office if no FSA-669A's were received for an election.
August 15, 2013	Final date for State Offices to notify DAFO no FSA-669A's were received in any counties.

2013 COC Election Schedule (Continued)

Date	Activity
September 5, 2013	County Offices ensure that: • each nominee is in SCIMS as an individual (first name, possibly middle initial, last name **only**; no entities or DBA's) • SCIMS matches the race, ethnicity, and gender information on FSA-669A • the correct determination codes for race, ethnicity, and gender have been selected for each nominee in SCIMS **Note:** If nominee has entered the race, ethnicity, and gender on FSA-669A, the determination codes in SCIMS shall be updated accordingly and show, "Customer Declared". • each nominee is flagged eligible to vote, and in the correct COC/LAA in the Producer Election data file. Final date for County Office to mail congratulation letters to nominees.
September 2 to September 23, 2013	County Offices enter nominee and ballot data in COC Elections web site. State Offices shall monitor closely to ensure that all elections are entered timely.
September 25, 2013	Deadline for name and address changes to be included in data sent to printing company.
November 4, 2013	FSA-669 to be mailed by printing company to each producer on eligible voter lists for LAA's holding election.
December 2, 2013	Voted FSA-669's or FSA-669B's to be returned to County Office or postmarked.
December 13, 2013	Final date for COC's and County Offices to count FSA-669's and FSA-669B's.
December 2 to December 31, 2013	Elections web site available for County Offices to enter election results. County Offices enter election results.

Example Postcard Wording

According to subparagraph 1 E, the following is example wording used on a postcard.

County FSA Committee (COC) Election

June 17 through August 1, 2013, is the period for nominating farmers and ranchers as candidates for the local COC election. FSA encourages all eligible producers to nominate themselves, or another eligible producer, to run for office. Nomination forms (FSA-669A's) are available:

- at **http://www.fsa.usda.gov/elections**, and scroll down to the links under "Election Materials" and CLICK "**2013 Nomination Form**"
- by picking up FSA-669A at your local FSA office
- by calling your local office and requesting FSA-669A be sent to you.

NOMINATE AND VOTE!