

**MINUTES
of the
Georgia Association of FSA County Office Employees
Executive Committee**

The Executive Committee and Officers of the Georgia Association of FSA County Office Employees met April 12, 2004 at 1:00 pm at the Georgia State Office in Athens, Georgia.

Those present were: Cliff Fussell, President Roger D. Swain, Vice-President
Denise Otto, Secretary Pam Wilkes, Treasurer
Jay Arnold, Past President
District 1A - Glenn Forrester, Ruby Postell
District 1B – Chris Camp, Rita Rogers
District 2 – Carol Streetman, Lori Faulkner
District 3 – Kyle Brown
District 4 – Walon Smith, Emily Flanders
District 5 – Chuck Riley, Barbara Webb
District 6 – Jerry Timmons, Cindy Brown
District 7 – Chad Scruggs, Monica Arnold
District 8 – Elaine Sherrod, Marcia Baker
Others Present: Thomas Verner, Eula Mae Queen (Retiree), Sara
Smith, Martha Kent (Acting DD), Brian Stuckey (Acting DD)

The President, Cliff Fussell, called the meeting to order. Prayer was offered. President Fussell asked everyone to introduce themselves and welcomed all Executive Committee members and visitors.

I, Denise Otto, GACOE Secretary, asked for a review of the last meeting minutes and for approval on them. Jay Arnold motioned for approval and Chuck Riley seconded.

The Treasurer, Pam Wilkes, gave the financial report. She stated that membership cards were in the mail. Pam stated that we were at 92% membership. Pam also passed out a list of non-members and stated that the list might not be 100% correct. She was open for any changes that anyone had on any additions or deletions. She stated that the list was given only to encourage non-members to join not to publicize to all FSA. Pam made the comment that the mailing of the Gazette to the Retirees has been a success, we have had several return Associate Members dues and that the notes and letters received from the retirees have been very nice.

Cliff Fussell, President, discussed our travel and meeting authorization. He stated that everyone there was authorized travel time to the meeting and back home, we are to take annual leave for meeting on Monday, April 12th and we were authorized to spend one night in Athens for the meeting with State Committee on Tuesday April 13th.

Cliff Fussell continued on with the agenda. He asked if we had any Old Business or New Business. Denise Otto encouraged all Executive members to join the Nascoe Group news page on Yahoo Groups website so that anything posted on this page would come to them

by email to keep them informed on the latest news. Cliff then went over the Hatch Act with the Executive Committee. Next Cliff mentioned that we were going to have a full legislative conference coming up first of next year and he stressed the importance of having attendees from Georgia to go. Cliff then went on to say that we need to know the factor on why Georgia is being hit so hard on cuts. Georgia is taking 18% of the Nation's cuts and we need to know what factor is being used to come up with this amount. This has been sent to Jim Little for answers.

Next on the agenda were Committee Reports. The Chairs reported as follows:

Legislative – Chad Scruggs, Chairperson

Chad gave report encouraging all members if they have the opportunity to go to a Legislative Conference in Washington to go. He stated that things went well, Congress was wanting to know why FSA was being cut so bad on funding and that they were not aware of these cuts. He also stated that permanent staff year ceilings were stressed to Congress and that NASCOE was looking out for us and doing all that they can to help us.

Membership – Rita Rogers, Chairperson- No Report

Benefits – Renee Peace, Chairperson- No Report

Awards – Barbara Webb, Chairperson- No Report

Barbara mentioned that we had one candidate in each category in Georgia and Diane Westmoreland had received Southeast Area Winner in Community Service and would be competing nationally. She also stated that she needed sick leave reports from each county.

Emblems – Marcia Baker, Chairperson– No Report

Elections- Monica Arnold, Chairperson – No Report

Publicity- Denise Otto, Chairperson

Denise stated that all news for the June Gazette needed to be turned in around the end of May. Rita Rogers stated that if you would like to put any news on the website to please email it to her. Also, let her know of any changes you would like to see on the website.

Archives- Ruby Postell –No Report

Scholarships-Glenn Forrester, Chairperson

Glenn stated that five students were sent to the South Rally to compete but no winner out of Georgia. He stated that all of the students rated high but just not a winner. He stated that after the meeting he and the Scholarship committee were going to grade scholarships and pick winners for 2004.

Parliamentarian-Jay Arnold-No Report

The 2004 Convention was discussed. Cliff stated that the convention was going to have to be held on it's on this year. The training session with the State Office failed to go through. Any training over \$25,000 has to be sent to Washington for approval and we heard nothing back on this. Also Ag Credit had training one month prior to when we had planned to have training. Chuck Riley has gotten committees together and stated that he was placing each person on the Executive Committee on a Convention Committee. He thought that everyone needed to be involved to make it work like we are planning. Chuck has also mailed letters to the Tobacco, Cotton, and Peanut Commissions for donations for the convention. Chuck stressed how we needed to get 80 to 120 rooms depending on where we have it. Chuck and Cliff both had a place in mind. Chuck said he was going to see what he could do at Callaway Gardens. Cliff stated that he had spoken to the lady at the Buccaneer Beach Resort in Jekyll Island and she was going to give us the \$63.00 room rate and if we used the Banquet Room she would comp all meeting rooms needed. The three dates she had available were August 12th – 14th, August 26th – 28th, and September 9th – 11th. The Executive Committee voted to have the convention at Jekyll Island and picked August 12th – 14th as dates for the convention. Jay Arnold stated that we needed to go ahead and give them a number of rooms. Eula Mae Queen stated the retirees would probably need 10-15 rooms. Fundraisers for the convention were discussed. We then discussed the possible speakers as David Vidrine – Vice-President NASCOE, Craig McCain – Southeast Area Chair, Larry Segars – Treasurer-NASCOE. We also ask Eula Mae Queen about a speech on RASCOE, and she agreed to it. We discussed having an Auction on Thursday night and a banquet on Friday night. We discussed maybe having two benefits sessions on Friday. Cliff discussed maybe having an open panel with State Committee on questions at the convention. He stated that he talked with Duke Lane, Chairman of the State Committee and he was not even aware of the cuts Georgia was going to have to take. He stressed how important it was for us to let our State Committee know what's going on in the County Office.

Next we discussed the questions we would present at the meeting on Tuesday with State Committee to see if any changes needed to be made. After discussing all questions, some adjustments were made to a few questions.

A few comments were made by the President, and the meeting was adjourned at 4:10 p.m.

Tuesday, April 13, 2004 – 9:00 a.m.

Same Executive Committee members present as Monday except Renee Peace-District 3 joined in on Tuesday.

The meeting was called to order by the president, Cliff Fussell.

We then went on to discuss more issues on the Convention. Chuck Riley stated he would be getting the committees together. We decided that we would have the general session Friday morning and meet with the State Committee mid morning on Friday. Also have

someone talk about benefits Friday morning. A golf tournament was discussed for Thursday with Auction that afternoon, also maybe a 2 man band or DJ after the Auction. Barbara Webb mentioned that each district or each office bring 2 items for auction. We also discussed auctioning off a State Office employee. We talked about a Registration Fee for the convention. It was decided that we would see how much costs were going to be for entertainment and food before we come up with this fee. We discussed a drawing for a free night's lodging for the people who have paid their dues to GACOE. A suggestion was made by Roger Swain about having the State Office Chiefs there if we decide to have an open panel discussion with the State Committee on Friday. Chad suggested maybe asking Bob Redding, Legislative Consultant for NASCOE in Washington D.C., to speak at the convention. Jay Arnold said he would talk to him about coming.

Mike Gibbs arrived and handed out a list of the questions that GACS wanted to ask the State Committee. He discussed them briefly. One of the questions was concerning the Partnership Council and if GACOE thinks we need to continue these meetings. Jay Arnold stated that he thought the Partnership Council meetings were needed, Mike Gibbs agreed.

P. L. Jowers joined the meeting.

Cliff asked if GACS wanted to participate in our convention. Mike Gibbs wrote down the dates and said he would discuss it with the GACS Committee to decide.

Glenn Forrester announced scholarship winners for Georgia. They are Charlotte Paulk and LeAnn Swain.

We then adjourned to meet with the State Committee for the questions sessions.

Those present were:

State Committee Members, Duke Lane-Chairperson, Pete Waller, Harry Kemp, and Jessie Rhodes, State Executive Director-Mr. Steve Newton, Kula C. Moore, District Directors, Phil Addy, Barry Laslie, Jeffery Harden, Brian Stuckey-Acting, Leon B. Collins, John Rudowske, David Nichols, and Martha Kent-Acting, COR's- Ronnie Morris and Virginia Lovering, Clark Weaver-State Office Chief, David Laster-State Office Chief, Ron Carey-State Office Chief, and the GACS Officers joined the meeting. The GACS officers present were: P. L. Jowers, Mike Gibbs, Jim Evans, Leigh Wilson, Jane Hobbs, and Robert Tyson.

Duke Lane opened the question sessions, Steve Newton stated that policy changes have been made and this question and answer session would hopefully be helpful in understanding the changes.

GACOE, President Cliff Fussell was asked to start the questions session.

Question 1: What are the current staffing levels for CO and GS?

- Answer: Kula stated that the staffing levels were 324 CO and 74 Federal.
- Question 2: What is the national factor that is referred to in the Q and A's from DAFO?
- Answer: Mr. Newton stated that this question had been asked many times and no answer had been given to his knowledge. Cliff stated that the County Office employees were concerned because Georgia would be receiving 18% of the cuts.
- Question 3: What is the State Office definition of attrition?
- Answer: Kula answered a gradual reduction in workforce without firing employees but not replacing when retired.
- Question 4: What is the timeframe for the attrition of the 39 employees, referred to in the 2004 staffing levels?
- Answer: Mr. Newton stated that there was no timeframe. A goal was set for attrition only. Timeline through attrition could be long. Plan may take a long time and may not happen, we just don't know.
- Question 5: We need retirement training if we are going to cut staff through attrition. Are their plans for training in the near future?
- Answer: Kula stated that Ginger is working on this with GRB. The training would consist of employees both Federal and Non Federal with 5 to 10 years until retirement. FERS and CSRS would be divided. It would probably be 1 day's training at different locations in Georgia in June or July.
- Question 6: Has a plan been developed for the staffing cuts in Georgia? If so, GACOE requests that it be made available to employees?
- Answer: Mr. Newton said no plan has been made in Georgia.
- Question 7: How can DAFO state that Georgia is 39 overstaffed and they can't provide the formula for this figure?
- Answer: See Question 2.
- Question 8: We have been informed that there is no overtime or compensatory time available to COF employees. If a county office has a producer in their

office at 5:00 pm, under the Fair Standard Labor Act, PT's can't be asked to serve the producer past their tour of duty, so what do we tell producers?

Answer: Mr. Newton said we needed to use our best judgment. Kula stated that Comp time was not a problem, using it timely was a problem. She stated that Comp time was okay if we use it instead of getting paid for it. We just don't have the money in budget to pay for it. We paid out around \$15,000 for comp time this year. Comp time has to be approved in advance through the DD. Comp time will be revisited.

Question 9: Will the STO provide a list of the overstaffed and understaffed offices in the state?

Answer: Cliff stated that GACOE wants opportunities to know which offices are overstaffed so if something came up and a PT knew they were overstaffed then they could possibly apply in a county within commuting distance. Kula stated that Report 1 Section A divided by 260 would give them this answer. Mr. Newton said we raised a good point but there was no plan to reduce 39 employees, there was no rifts planned, only attrition. Mr. Newton stated that reassignment within 50 mile radius may be looked at. Mr. Newton did not want to put a list out there because it would be insinuating a cut when there is no plan for cuts. Cliff stressed our concern about what may happen 6 months down the road. Roger asked about a situation when an understaffed office needed help. Duke Lane stated that counties that need help could get help if needed. Mr. Newton stated that he will address these problems as they come.

Question 10: Will employees in overstaffed offices be reassigned to understaffed offices?

Answer: See Answer for Question 9.

Question 11 and 14: What is the status of the 13 COF employees that are doing nothing but Ag Credit work, when it comes to the 39 overstaffed positions in Georgia? These employees are not doing FSA legacy programs and should not count against the CO ceiling. What is the STO position regarding this issue?

In counties where COF employees are doing nothing but Ag Credit work, these are generally TYPE 1 offices. Shouldn't these employees be assigned to the legacy farm programs and assist in Ag Credit as needed? It appears that these offices are overstaffed by the number of CO employees doing Ag Credit work?

Answer: Mr. Newton stated that they would take this issue to the DD, CED and FLM and Mr. Laster about help in TYPE 1 offices and ask them to take each situation and work with it. Kula stated that DAFO said all new hires

would be Non-Federal for Ag Credit work. Kula wanted to know if anyone did any research on other states concerns.

Question 12: Does the state workload for Ag Credit support the federal staffing and the CO staffing?

Answer: Kula stated that each Type 1 office has to have at least a FLM, FLO, and PT to support them, minimum staffing is needed for Farm Loan Programs. The question was not answered.

Question 13: What is the status of a FLOT or COT program?

Answer: Mr. Newton has applied for them in Washington again.

Question 14: See Question 11

Question 15: Does the IT staff have a time frame to have reported problems fixed?

Answer: Did not answer.

Question 16: How can NRCS get a fleet of new vehicles and RD get new equipment and close the office for a week, for the whole group to attend training while FSA answers the phones and FSA is facing staffing cuts? Are we all really working for the USDA, if so where is the FSA Administration during budget time?

Answer: Mr. Newton stated he would have to forward this question on to Washington.

Question 17, 18, 19, 20: 17-Employees that had requested Restored Annual Leave were notified on March 31, 2004 that leave could not be approved. What was the reason for this and has other states in the area followed the same practice?

18-If it is based on Exigency of Public Business, then please explain how the 2001/2002 Disaster Program and the 2001/2002 Livestock Assistance Program would not be considered emergency programs as stated in 17-PM Par. 66 A?

19-If this is a denial of the request for Employees requesting Restored Annual Leave, shouldn't employees receive the same courtesy our producers receive when we deny them a request, they receive appeal rights, what appeal rights have employees been granted? Is the grievance board, the procedure where employees should address this concern?

20-GACOE ask that these requests be reconsidered on a case by case basis, we feel that there were extenuating circumstances in some cases. Restoring this leave will not increase county office expenses or payroll. Is this possible?

Answer: Mr. Newton stated that his interpretation of Exigency was work that prohibited the person to get the job done in a normal workday. He stated these cases were looked at on a case by case basis. Kula stated that the employee needed to state the specific reason they were unable to use their leave during leave year. Kula said these issues can go before the grievance board per the leave handbook. Mr. Newton made the comment to use annual leave before the end of year.

Question 21: We ask that field reporters be able to exceed the 2 day per pay period guide, in situations that be deemed necessary by DD?

Answer: This is being looked at and DD will let us know.

Question 22: Will a buyout be made available to CO employees?

Answer: Mr. Newton and Kula stated that they have not heard of one.

Question 23: Is there any discussions regarding office closures for the state of Georgia?

Answer: Mr. Newton said the plan was on the Secretaries desk, he has not heard anything else about it.

Question 24: We were of the understanding that there was funding for the 9 remaining temporaries through the end of the FY then they were all released, what happened to the funding?

Answer: Kula said she thought the money came from payroll money but actually there were two pots of money and as of PP5 the money for temps, etc... had been exceeded therefore the other temps had to be released.

Question 25: In discussion with other states it appears that Georgia is behind regarding GPS training and use, although the training we have received has been good we need more. Are there any plans for further training in the near future?

Answer: Mr. Newton stated that we do need GPS training as soon as possible. Clark Weaver stated that we do not have a GIS position in Georgia and we are behind in digitizing and CLU. Clark voted that this was a critical position that needed to be filled.

Question 26: Some counties report delays in response from the STO loading travel and the automated system we are currently using; can additional assistance be made available for this?

Answer: Kula stated that Debbie is in charge of Administrative Travel and they would look at the lead PT in each District on Travel to help out. Newton expressed that a list is being generated to help out in Districts on people who are comfortable in the different program areas.

Question 27 & 28: What will be the process when a PT retires or leaves the agency, regarding filling the position?
What will be the process when a CED retires or leaves the agency, regarding filling the position?

Answer: Mr. Newton said that when these positions are opened he will send to Washington for approval. It will be up to Washington whether it can be filled or not.

Question 29: Does the STO foresee Rif's as a process to reach the staffing cuts, if mandated from DC?

Answer: Mr. Newton stated that there was no rif plan in place to his knowledge.

Question 30: Is it possible for the DCP ending signup to be the same as the final reporting date of July 15?

Answer: Ron Carey stated that this may be a statutory date and we may not be able to change. He is checking on this.

Question 31: In previous years when budget constraints, staffing and office closures were coming down from DC, Georgia seemed to want to lead the way, we ask that Georgia now take the position that many other states did in previous years, and not act so hastily. How do the STC and STO feel about this?

Answer: Mr. Newton says our position is okay, he would have to comply with information ask of Washington. Mr. Newton intends to only take action when told.

Question 32: Partnership Council?

Answer: See GACS Question 1.

This ended the questions for the GACOE Association. Cliff Fussell stated that he appreciated the State Committee and Mr. Newton listening to their questions and answering them to their best knowledge.

The floor was turned over to GACS to address their questions. Mike Gibbs then proceeded in asking the questions.

Question 1: During our last meeting. On October 14, 2003, approval was given to reconvene the quarterly Partnership Council meetings beginning in March 2004? What is the status of the Partnership Council?

Answer: Mr. Newton stated he and Kula would work to set a date. They needed to get a meeting facilitator. He ask who was the last one suppose to be and Mike Gibbs said Gay Harris. Mike Gibbs made the comment that he thinks everyone would benefit to continue the Partnership Council and Cliff agreed.

Question 2: The Administration has proposed the hiring of 100 additional federal FTE's nationwide to be PT's, FLO's and FLOT's. We have several current/pending vacancies. What is your feeling on getting these classified as "critical positions"?

Answer: Mr. Newton stated that he was applying for every position with Washington to be opened as they come. He considers all openings critical.

Question 3: We have been told that one federal FTE will be lost in the current "rightsizing" initiative. Is this still the case?

Answer: Mr. Newton and Kula stated still looking at 1.

Question 4: What is the target number of federal FTE's? How many federal FTE's are "on board" today considering retirements since January 1?

Answer: Kula stated 75 on board, 5 vacancies have been approved. We will be up to 80 then. 3 are going to retire.

Question 5: Were the three federal "IT" positions included in the federal FTE ceiling of 78?

Answer: Yes, Kula stated IT positions will not add to the County Office situation when IT is converged.

Question 6: Do FLOT's hired under the career intern program count against the federal ceiling?

Answer: YES

Question 7: We understand that NRCS State Office employees have been issued ID cards that do not have their SSN's on them. In times of frequent identity theft, is FSA considering the same measures?

Answer: Kula stated that she could do an ID badge without Social Security Number showing. She said that the next time you are in the STO to go to Donna in Admin and ask for new card to be made without your Social Security number on it. Kula also is checking with Washington on new card stock on ID badge.

After the last question, Mike Gibbs wanted to make a comment on GACOE's questions 11 and 14. He stated that they did not have temporaries and he talked about getting PT's on Federal side. Kula stated that they would have to close that position and reapply on the federal side. This would cause the person to possibly loose their job because of having to advertise to all federal employees. It is a tough situation to do. Mr. Newton made the comment that the employee should be utilized to the fullest extent through DD, FLM, and CED's. Discussion was held on Admin PT having to take duties of Travel away from the FLPT when they have a lot of experience in this program.

This concluded the questions. Duke Lane, STC Chairperson and Steve Newton, SED made final remarks. Mr. Newton wanted to know if we felt better about the 39 positions in Georgia. Cliff stated that we were concerned about what may happen down the road after elections. Chuck Riley made the statement about we were worried about what is not being said because Washington is not giving the factor for State cuts. Jay Arnold ask Mr. Newton if he would send an email to all employees letting them no that there was not a plan to rified any employees, that the cuts were going to be through attrition only, to ease employees minds of losing their jobs. Mr. Newton said he would do that.

Mr. Newton asks David Laster to speak a little on the new Farm Business Plan. David Laster stated he was impressed with the training and he thought it was a very good move that the Agency was taking. He stated this Plan would bring us up to the level of other agricultural lenders. It is a lot of material to learn. SCIMS is tied into the new plan and also other programs. He stated we needed to work together as one and not point fingers. He was looking forward to the change. Mike Gibbs asks David Laster for loan making figure and he said he was sharing them with the DD that afternoon. David did make the statement that we have loaned more money at this point than last year.

Mr. Newton made the comment on the hiring of the DD's for District's 4 and 2. He said the timeframe for hiring in District 4 was Tuesday, April 20th, and District 2 would be advertised quickly. It would be advertised 10 workings days only instead of 4 weeks.

Cliff then made a few more remarks. He asked Clark about getting some clarification on the Boll Weevil Program and possibly getting a Reimbursable Agreement with them.

Clark stated he would get out some clarification on the Boll Weevil Program and exactly what we were suppose to do and get from the producer. Cliff also asks Kula about the vacancy in Wayne County for CED, would this count as strike two on COT's. Kula said there was only one strike per county. He also went over the selected site and dates of the convention, and asks for the State Committee to meet with us. Mr. Newton and Kula both agreed to the date of August 12-14, 2004 at the Buccaneer Beach Resort in Jekyll Island, Georiga and said that they were okay with them. Cliff made the statement that the GACOE Executive Committee was discussing having an open panel discussion with STC and Program Chiefs at the convention.

Mr. Newton then made the closing remark that if he had a clear message or a definite answer he would tell us. He said not to overreact to reductions and that they would share with us any information they receive from Washington.

They're being no further business, the meeting adjourned at 12:00 p.m.

Respectfully Submitted,

Denise L. Otto
GACOE Secretary