

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 October 14, 2003 at the USDA Service Center in Moultrie, Georgia.

Those present were: Jay Arnold, President Cliff Fussell, Vice-President
Pam Wilkes, Treasurer Thomas Verner, Past President
District 1A - Glenn Forrester
District 1B – Rita Rogers
District 2 – Roger Swain and Denise Otto
District 3 – Kyle Brown and Renee Peace
District 4 – Walon Smith and Emily Flanders
District 5 – Chuck Riley and Barbara Webb
District 6 – Jerry Timmons and Cindy Brown
District 7 – Chad Scruggs and Monica Arnold
District 8 – Keith Harris, Alternate and Marcia Baker
Others Present – Brian Stuckey, Sara Smith

The President, Jay Arnold, called the meeting to order. Prayer was offered. President Arnold introduced and welcomed the new and all returning Executive Committee members.

The Treasurer, Pam Wilkes, gave the financial report. She stated that the money from the convention was not kept separate on the different events we had so there was no way for her to divide it up on the financial report. It was discussed that at the next convention things be kept separate as best as we can so we would know how much money was made on each event. Pam also passed out a list of 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. The list she had given also notated the members who were payroll deduction and the members that paid cash. She stated that the list was given only to encourage non-members to join not to publicize to all FSA.

Jay Arnold, President, discussed our travel and meeting authorization. He stated that everyone there was authorized travel time to the meeting and back home. For the people who are staying over in Albany, we would use the M&IE for Moultrie and the Lodging for Albany.

Election of Officers – Elections were held as follows:

Jay Arnold opened the floor for any nominations for President. Chuck Riley nominated Cliff Fussell for President. It was motioned and seconded that all nominations be closed

on the said one name. It was motioned and seconded that Cliff Fussell be elected President by acclamation. All motions passed. Cliff Fussell was elected as President.

The floor was then open for any nominations for Vice-President. Chuck Riley nominated Roger Swain for Vice-President. It was motioned and seconded that all nominations be closed on the said one name. It was motioned and seconded that Roger Swain be elected Vice-President by acclamation. All motions passed. Roger Swain was elected Vice President.

The floor was open for any nominations for Secretary. Pam Wilkes nominated Denise Otto for the Secretary position. It was motioned and seconded that all nominations be closed on the said one name. It was motioned and seconded that Denise Otto be elected Secretary by acclamation. All motions passed. Denise Otto was elected Secretary.

The floor was open for any nominations for Treasurer. Glenn Forrester nominated Pam Wilkes for Treasurer. It was motioned and seconded that all nominations be closed on the said one name. It was motioned and seconded that Pam Wilkes be elected Treasurer by acclamation. All motions passed. Pam Wilkes was elected Treasurer.

After the elections, there were brief remarks made by the new officers. Jay Arnold then turned the meeting over to the new president Cliff Fussell.

Cliff Fussell continued on with the agenda discussing the dues next. Remarks were made on what the associate members were paying. Pam Wilkes stated \$20.00. This amount went directly to NASCOE. Chuck Riley motioned that the associate member's dues be raised to \$25.00 and the dues for regular members stay the same at .002 times salary after COLA. Walon Smith seconded it. This increase in associate member's dues would cover any newsletter mailing cost to each associate member.

Jay Arnold then discussed NAFEC dues and what they consist of; he stated that this was a farmer's association and that they work for us on a lot of issues. Cliff Fussell, President, stated that Georgia really needed NAFEC backing us on the hill and how they have such strong support. The dues would be \$35.00. They stressed to all Committee representatives to go back and encourage CED's to get County Committee members in their Districts to join.

The Scholarship Program was discussed. It was motioned by Chad Scruggs that three scholarships be given this year if we had enough money. Cliff Fussell stated that a fundraiser could be done for the Scholarships Program. Other states do this for their Scholarship funds. Pam Wilkes, Treasurer, stated that if we have a convention on our own this year it would cost more money. Thomas Verner stated that we needed to prepare for expenses down the road also. Chuck Riley stated that he would see about getting a lawn mower donated for a fundraiser, he also stated if we have three scholarship applications and funds then we should give three. After the discussions on these issues it was motioned

and seconded that we leave the Scholarship funds at \$1000.00 and if we only get three applications then we would poll GACOE Executive Committee and discuss options, also Jay Arnold added that we needed to be real clear on the deadlines for these applications.

The GACOE website was discussed by Thomas Verner and Rita Rogers. Things are up and running and looking good. They encouraged members to make sure they let their Districts know the website address, also if any members wanted any information sent to the website they could email it in a Microsoft Word document to Rita or Thomas. Thomas also told the Secretary, Denise Otto, that the minutes could also be done this way so they would be posted for all members to read. Denise stated that this would be done as soon as possible after the meeting.

The 2004 Convention was discussed. Jay Arnold stated that if we had the convention with the State Office that it would expose a lot more people and save GACOE money. Thomas Verner then stated that no one from Washington would come and speak unless it was a joint convention with GACS. These two items were discussed and it was decided to break and discuss convention in more detail after the session with the State Committee.

2004 GACOE Committees were discussed and SEA chairs were given to each committee member. Each committee then reported as follows:

Legislative – Cliff Fussell, Chairperson

Cliff stated that any negotiation items be sent to Joy English, Chairperson for Negotiations. Jay Arnold stated that a mini conference would be held this year with only one or two delegates going.

Membership – Roger Swain, Chairperson

Roger stated that we were at 89% membership to date. Pam Wilkes then stated that we are low on associate members, 13 to count.

Benefits – Walon Smith, Chairperson- No Report

Awards – Barbara Webb, Chairperson- No Report

Emblems – Marcia Baker – No Report

Elections-Lori Deloach – No Report

Publicity- Mary Porter – No Report

Archives- Ruby Postell –No Report

Scholarships-Peggy Greer-No Report

Parliamentarian-Thomas Verner-No Report

Jay Arnold handed out National Committee reports from National Convention and also gave out the email addresses for the NASCOE Committee Chairpersons. He encouraged the new GACOE Committee Chairpersons to contact these people so that they can correspond with the information that they know on new issues.

Cliff Fussell, President, will assign Committee Chairpersons for the new year soon.

Jay Arnold gave NASCOE news. The NASCOE Convention will be held in Baltimore, Maryland for 2004. The dates for this convention are July 28-31, 2004. The SEA Convention will be in New Orleans in March 2004. There is talk about a joint convention with SEA and SWA. Jay Arnold also stated that a 4.1% raise was still a good possibility; it was just according to which bill it got attached to on whether it would pass.

After a break the State Committee Members, Duke Lane-Chairperson, Scott Cagle, Pete Waller, and Harry Kemp, State Executive Director-Mr. Steve Newton, District Directors, Phil Addy, J. W. Black, Barry Laslie, Jeffery Harden, John Dumas, Leon B. Collins, John Rudowske, David Nichols, 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, Leigh Wilson, Jane Hobbs, and Robert Tyson.

GACS, President Mike Gibbs was asked to start the questions session.

Question 1: What is the status of the Partnership Council? We were told last year that it had not been abolished, but no meetings have been held in over a year. Why?

Answer: Mr. Newton stated that he was not aware that the Partnership Council had dissolved. He said that he thought the Partnership Council was a great idea and he would check on the status of things. He targeted a March 2004 meeting to proceed with the members as left off.

Question 2: Why has cross training of all FLP employees on FP program been discontinued? 16 AO Handbook refers to cross training of all programs and DD advertisement questionnaires are unbalanced towards FP. In addition, a basic knowledge of FP is beneficial in loan collections and servicing.

Answer: Mr. Newton stated that he would find a way to get information from meetings to all personnel. Mr. Scott Cagle could not understand why these meetings were not recorded on video or tape recorder for multiple uses in the future. Mr. Newton said he would look into this.

Question 3: There have been at least 5 DD positions filled since the merger of FmHA and ASCS, and a possibility of more vacancies in the near future. The majority of our current FLM's have applied for DD positions, yet none have been selected. What specifically do FLP employees need to do to be equally considered for DD positions?

Answer: Mr. Newton stated that the DD positions were not in a pre-selective mode. He felt that there was an excellent review panel in all the interviews and that the DD positions were very competitive positions and knowledge of farm programs was definitely a plus.

Question 4: Mention has been made in the past of a retirement planning seminar for ALL interested employees. It would be very beneficial. Will it be held and when?

Answer: Mr. Newton stated that Kula and Ginger were working on getting a series of meetings on Retirement planning for all interested employees. This may be contracted out in the first quarter.

Question 5: We still desperately need FLOT's. Will we get some and when? Secondly, are there other programs available that could be utilized to provide additional help?

Answer: There are 2 positions open. David Laster made remarks that he was contacting schools and colleges and that the positions have been published. The question was asked why we haven't hired a previous applicant. To my knowledge this question was not answered.

Question 6: Thank you for hearing our request that the FLM be involved in the hiring process for employees needed in their respective offices, and for the hiring of 2 Federal PT's in the last year. Will the trend continue to hire future PT's as Federal if requested?

Answer: Mr. Newton answered this question "yes".

Question 7: Are any CO and GS PT upgrades being considered at this time?

Answer: To Mr. Newton's knowledge he did not know, he stated he would have to do some research on this question.

Question 8: Many offices throughout the state have new, modern facilities. However, most offices are still using old, mismatched furniture. Is there a possibility of furniture upgrades in the future?

Answer: Mr. Newton stated that we have a very limited amount of money for this, not only our state but also every state. He also stated that the budget this year was not good.

This ended the questions for the GACS Association. Mike Gibbs stated that he appreciated the State Committee and Mr. Newton listening to their questions and answering them to his best knowledge.

The floor was turned over to GACOE to address their questions. Cliff Fussell then proceeded in asking the questions.

Question 1: What is the status of State Conferences for FY 2004?

Answer: Mr. Newton stated that Washington has pulled out on all State Conferences and cut them off as of now, due to budget.

Question 2: If we are not going to have a State Conference, can we make plans to have a GACOE/GACS Convention in conjunction with STO training in 2004 (possibly in Athens)?

Answer: Mr. Ron Carey stated that it is Farm Loan's Department to have meetings this time if we are to have a joint convention. This had to be addressed further with the Administrative Officer to discuss funds and needs for training.

Question 3: What can we be told about Office Consolidations? Can we get a copy of the Plan sent up for review?

Answer: Mr. Newton stated that he has always told us that he would be honest in answering our questions. His answer was that the plan is on the Secretary of Agriculture's desk as we spoke and he had no idea of the outcome of the plan. He stated that he felt like they would accept the plan submitted to them which did not severely impact Georgia, but he did not know this definitely.

Question 4: Are there plans for another COT class anytime soon?

Answer: Mr. Newton stated that a COT training program is in the works, even as early as two months.

Question 5: GACOE had received complaints about vacancies not being filled timely. Should consideration be given to establish some type of timeline for filling vacancies so that situations can be prevented?

Answer: Mr. Newton stated that CED vacancies are left up to the County Committee to submit a request to fill. The State Office will make sure the County Committee has an adequate reason for not filling.

Question 6: Personnel in the STO receive detailed training on programs (usually a week) whereas COF employees, who deal with producers one on one, receive at most, only 2 days of training. Producers expect us to know the programs therefore they do not understand that programs are handed to us with little or no training (sometimes only a teleconference). COF employees would welcome and need detailed training from National Training meetings.

Answer: Mr. Ron Carey stated that when they are at a National Training that the meetings are trying to cover information for all 50 states and that the extra days of training were needed to cover all questions the states may have on programs. He stated that they are only receiving an average of 2 days of training that would pertain to Georgia.

Question 7: Budget will determine the fate of temporaries. Has anything or anyone indicated what their status may be?

Answer: Mr. Newton stated that funds were running out for one group of temporaries but the others were okay right now.

Question 8: We need a more professional notification system for our Awards Program. An email with a list of recipients does not get the job done. No one knows who nominated them, what for, or how much the award was for.

Answer: Mr. J. W. Black, District Director stated that he was a part of the Awards Committee and he is the one that requested a list be published. He felt that everyone needed to be commended on the good job they do. He also stated that he did not think the type of award should be put in there. He also stated that a copy of the AD-287-2 is given to each employee so that they know who nominated them and the recommendation written for the award.

Question 9: AO Chiefs and SED training has been completed. Did anything new, concerning employees, come out of that meeting (Such as PT Reclassification)?

Answer: See GACS Question 7 for answer.

Question 10: Is there any training planned on Flexible Spending Accounts, or investing in the new TSP program and categories being planned?

Answer: See GACS Question 4. Kula will be getting up a series of training for these items.

Question 11: We need for the IT staff to periodically visit COF's to help us with questions we have about our systems. Maybe one or twice a year if possible. Everyone needs some one on one help with their computer (Microsoft Word, emailing, shortcuts, etc...).

Answer: Mr. Newton stated that maybe we needed to get a person in each District to help out on this or maybe have State Office pay for us to take courses at Technical Schools. He was not aware that this training was needed and will look into it.

Question 12: What is the status of IT Convergence?

Answer: Mr. Newton stated the IT convergence was proceeding on schedule to begin October 1, 2004.

Question 13: Our jobs are much harder and confusing due to software problems and no guidance (handbooks). These things, mixed in with understaffed and overworked employees, makes life miserable. Please help us by constantly informing D. C. that programs do not need to be started until everything is in place.

Answer: Mr. Newton and State Committee both agreed and said they would do whatever they could.

Question 14: What kind of breaks or stress relief, during the work day, are available to COF employees? We need some suggestions and need them passed on the CED's.

Answer: Mr. Newton stated that there is a PM Notice that came out and addressed this. He said they are looking at this at a National Level. To his knowledge the only break we have is our lunch break.

Question 15: Has any overtime been distributed to Districts? It appears that some of the heavy workload districts needed much more.

Answer: Mr. Newton stated that the overtime money was not going to be as tight as they had heard.

Question 16: Do COF's get a factored credit for collections, security checks, contacting producers, taking loan collections, for FLP?

Answer: Mr. David Laster stated that FSA gets 8 days credit for every office on Farm Loan activity.

Question 17: Has there been any mention of Voluntary Separation Incentive Payments or Voluntary Early Retirements for CO employees?

Answer: Mr. Newton said "no", he has not heard of any.

Question 18: Can you go over the process on personnel actions regarding negative Performance issues. Do these require HRD approval?

Answer: Mr. Newton did not want to go into detail on this question; he stated that it would rely on the level of the issue.

Question 19: Is there any possibility that COF employee performance appraisal system will be changed from acceptable/non-acceptable, to a system that would provide management with an opportunity to address areas that are borderline?

Answer: Mr. Newton stated that this is a Washington decision.

Question 20: We need detailed Compliance training, as many employees doing this work, have not been exposed to compliance training? EQIP training?

Answer: Mr. Clark Weaver agreed that these trainings were needed; he also stated that he would get up a Compliance meeting in regards to the new handbook and new employees not having training. He said hopefully in March or April this could be done.

Question 21: Is the GIS Coordinator position permanent or temporary? Will it be advertised or not?

Answer: Mr. Clark Weaver stated that Stephanie Brown was a temporary employee. She is very knowledgeable of the program and been a very big asset to the State Office in this position. At this time they did not know if the position would be open to a full time position; however, the GIS Coordinator position will be advertised statewide if the permanent position is authorized.

This concluded the questions and Cliff Fussell and Jay Arnold stated that we appreciated the time and opportunity to meet with the State Committee and the State Executive Director. Duke Lane, STC Chairperson and Steve Newton, SED made final remarks.

The meeting continued with just the Executive members on discussing the convention. A convention committee was formed which will consist of Rita Rogers, Kyle Brown, Chuck Riley, Jay Arnold, Walon Smith, and Pam Wilkes. The issue was to have the convention by itself with just GACOE or have another joint convention with GACS and STO training. It was decided that we would poll the members of GACOE and get their ideas and opinions and have the survey returned at least by the 15th of November to get the plans underway. Chuck Riley volunteered to get an email out regarding these issues with the approval of Kula. Everyone agreed that when we got these back we would meet and decide on the possibilities on where to have the convention. Discussions on the need to have it in a place where all persons can be together and not scattered all over 3 or 4 different motels, so people would participate in the events that will be held. Possibilities discussed were Athens, Macon, or Atlanta. The speakers were also discussed and Cliff Fussell stated that he would try to get Cole Sims to come and speak for NAFEC, also Bob Redding from Washington who is our Legislative Consultant for NASCOE. Maybe get a few County Committee members to come. Another issue was that the retirees felt that they were not having a lot of time to spend with there fellow friend and employees when the convention is being held with training meetings. We all felt that the retirees needed to be recognized and need to receive our newsletter so that they can keep up with the news on the convention when we decide details. These issues were left at that until we get the surveys back from members and Jay Arnanta discussed the issue with Kula to even see if we could have it jointly again.

Cliff Fussell and Jay Arnold made final remarks.

They're being no further business, the meeting adjourned at 4:30 p.m.

Respectfully Submitted,

Denise L. Otto
GACOE Secretary