

MEMORANDUM OF RECORD

SUBJECT: Strategic Analysis of the Farm Service Agency

The Farm Service Agency (FSA), an extension of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), holds a mission deeply rooted in supporting American farmers and ranchers to enhance the vibrancy of the nation's agricultural (AG) economy. Acting as a vital link between farmers and the government, the FSA implements AG policies, administers credit and loan programs, and manages various initiatives crucial to the AG sector.

1. MISSION

“To deliver timely, effective programs and services to America’s farmers and ranchers to support them in sustaining our Nation’s vibrant agricultural economy, as well as to provide first-rate support for domestic and international food aid efforts.”

FSA's multifaceted mission aims to create value and address the diverse needs of farmers and ranchers across the United States, including financial assistance and disaster relief, commodity operations, inclusion, conservation, education, and farm loan programs. Financial assistance and disaster relief are at the forefront of this organization's mission. The FSA is most widely known for this safety net for farmers within the AG sector as they strive to provide income support and disaster assistance programs. These funds would mitigate potential loss against catastrophic market events and natural disasters if administered swiftly and successfully.

The Farm Loan Program is another financial aspect central to the FSA's mission. Direct loans and loan guarantees through the FSA help support farm ownership, operations, conservation, and disaster recovery. This credit and technical assistance help farmers obtain resources for commercial success, an essential opportunity for new and generational farmers. Beyond the local domestic scope, the FSA emphasizes the effects of international markets on the American farmer. Through the purchase, sale, and donation of commodities owned by the Commodity Credit Corporation, international and domestic food security is another facet central to the FSA's mission.

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Behind every successful agricultural operation is a commitment to sustainable agricultural practices, as farming is nothing without land and natural resources. Conservation efforts by the FSA assist agricultural producers and landowners in implementing practices that conserve soil, water, air, and wildlife resources, promoting environmental stewardship. On a more personal level, the FSA also strives to emphasize inclusivity and diversity; something the FSA has historically had shortcomings in. Through this, the FSA strives to emphasize the importance of veterans, socially disadvantaged, and beginner farmers through tailored loans, grants, and assistance. The agricultural sector is a melting pot of diversity and the FSA's focus on inclusivity successfully shapes a modern FSA.

Lastly, the FSA emphasizes the importance of continuing education within the agricultural industry. Through educational programs, a central facet of their mission, the FSA seeks to provide information through studies, reports, and classes on all aspects of the agricultural sector, including market data, developments in conservation efforts, and evolving technology. The FSA strives to empower farmers to make informed decisions and achieve goals through these efforts.

In essence, FSA's mission is to support and uplift American farmers and ranchers by providing a range of services and programs that address the unique challenges of the agricultural industry. The organization's commitment to inclusivity, sustainability, and financial support establishes it as a crucial force in ensuring the continued success of the nation's agricultural endeavors. Value is created by delivering these services in alignment with FSA's core values: Strong Ethics, Customer Service, Teamwork, Inclusive Decision-Making, and Fiscal Responsibility. Through this mission, FSA actively contributes to the long-term sustainability and prosperity of the nation's agricultural sector.

2. ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY

The FSA stands as a linchpin in the agricultural landscape of the United States, entrusted with a multifaceted mission to support farmers and ranchers. The agency's ability to execute this mission effectively is intricately woven into its organizational capacity, encompassing organizational structure,

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systems, and culture. The breakdown of these components sheds light on the challenges and tensions faced by FSA, emphasizing the need for strategic adjustments to maintain excellence in service.

FSA's organizational structure is carefully delineated within the congressional framework and overseen by the Secretary of AG. The hierarchical model ensures a clear line of authority and accountability, with the FSA administrator reporting to an undersecretary of AG for Farm Production and Conservation. Functional divisions, including Farm Programs, Farm Loans, Commodity Operations, Management, and State Operations, enable efficient resource allocation, allowing the agency to address specific facets of its mission. The unique local service delivery model, with 2,124 county offices serving as the frontline for interactions with farmers, reflects a decentralized approach, enhancing adaptability to regional challenges.

The adoption of the Budget and Performance Management System (BPMS) signifies FSA's commitment to transforming into a performance-based and results-focused organization. The BPMS aligns strategic goals, performance measures, and outcomes, promoting transparency and fiscal responsibility. Computational and statistical work in Kansas City underscores the agency's recognition of the pivotal role of technology in managing data and supporting decision-making processes. The ongoing modernization efforts demonstrate FSA's commitment to embracing continuous improvement.

The bedrock of FSA's organizational capacity lies in its culture, shaped by core values that include strong ethics, customer service, teamwork, inclusive decision-making, and fiscal responsibility. These are guiding principles for employee behavior, decision-making, and interactions with farmers. FSA prides itself on its service-based culture, emphasizing delivering the highest level of customer service while underscoring the agency's commitment to supporting farmers and ranchers.

The capacity for program implementation within FSA is distributed across the organization, with state and county field offices bearing significant responsibility. This decentralized structure allows for flexibility and adaptability at the local level, acknowledging and addressing the unique challenges faced

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by farmers in different regions. Moreover, FSA's coordination with external organizations, such as the Risk Management Agency and National Resource Conservation Service, enhances its ability to support farmers by leveraging expertise and resources beyond the USDA framework.

While FSA exhibits a dynamic interplay of structure, systems, and culture, some discernible tensions and gaps necessitate strategic attention. The FSA acknowledges a 'one size fits all' approach fails due to differing needs and challenges across all nation but has failed to nail down a solution. A lack of independent, clearly articulated mission and goals creates tension at the state level. Addressing this gap by formulating a state-specific mission aligned with federal objectives is crucial. Challenges in FSA's historically successful in-person service model, stemming from budget constraints, increasing workload, and technological advancements, require adjustments and innovation. Staffing challenges, including understaffing and transitions, present gaps hindering field agents' engagement with farmers and raising concerns about retention of institutional knowledge due to retirements.

FSA's organizational capacity is a dynamic and intricate interplay of various elements. While the agency has demonstrated strength in its organizational structure, systems, and culture, acknowledging and addressing tensions and gaps is paramount for ensuring continued excellence in service delivery. Strategic adjustments that align with evolving yet differing agricultural landscapes across the country will fortify FSA's ability to fulfill its mission and support the nation's farmers and ranchers effectively.

3. PROCESSES

An integral aspect of the FSA's commitment to excellence lies in its comprehensive set of processes designed to assess overall institutional performance, unit performance, and individual staff members. FSA's evaluation processes highlight strengths, shortcomings, and the imperative for continuous refinement to adapt to evolving needs.

BPMS is the linchpin of its performance management, serving as a transformative tool in the agency's journey toward a more performance-based and results-focused organization. By aligning

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strategic goals, end outcomes, and performance measures, the BPMS emphasizes both efficiency and societal outcomes. Its systematic approach links budgeting with performance, ensuring a collaborative development of goals that align with industry needs. However, challenges in continuous improvement, data collection, and potential gaps in measuring specific outcomes pose as shortcomings, necessitating ongoing refinement for optimal effectiveness.

On a more personal level, individual staff members undergo annual performance reviews, a standard practice for government employees. These reviews focus on defining metrics for success, goal setting, and providing feedback during counseling sessions. Quarterly follow-ups enable a structured approach to evaluating individual performance and allow for continuous improvement. However, the evaluation's focus on inputs and outputs might limit its effectiveness, as the impact of programs may not be clearly defined. The need for metrics associated with impact and outcomes calls for a nuanced approach in defining success.

Overall, program evaluation under FSA's strategic goals is a robust process involving outcome-oriented and efficiency measures. This approach ensures alignment with overarching goals, thus emphasizing transparency and fiscal responsibility. Nevertheless, the challenge lies in establishing comprehensive metrics capturing the diverse impact of programs on societal outcomes. Ongoing efforts to refine and expand these metrics are essential, yet the program lacks adequate performance measurement systems.

Identifying challenges and opportunities in service delivery is a proactive approach, as demonstrated by initiatives like Bridges to Opportunity. FSA acknowledges these as opportunities for improvement, emphasizing the need to enhance in-person service delivery efficiency and respond to growing demands for online options. However, constraints such as legacy IT infrastructure and resistance to online services pose challenges, highlighting the necessity for a systematic approach to online service delivery to enhance adaptability.

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In conclusion, FSA's evaluation processes showcase a commitment to efficiency and societal impact. The strengths in structured performance reviews and adaptive initiatives underscore the agency's dedication to continuous improvement. However, addressing shortcomings, refining outcome metrics, and overcoming constraints in service delivery innovation is imperative for FSA to navigate the ever-evolving agricultural landscape effectively. Continuous refinement will fortify the agency's performance and ensure its sustained contribution to the prosperity of American agriculture.

4. INTENT

As the newly appointed Montgomery County FSA Executive Director Trainee (CEDT), I will begin the twelve-month training program required to serve as a County Executive Director (CED). During this time, I intend to address many of the identified shortcomings previously discussed while mastering the managerial responsibilities inherent to the position. As a newcomer to the region, I will prioritize relationships forged on trust. Each interaction with customers will allow me to provide tailored feedback to address specific needs.

Acknowledging the power of messaging, I will improve our communications strategy to better inform community farmers within the region of our services and relevant happenings and opportunities within the agricultural sphere. Through a targeted social media campaign, we will deliver the same quality content as the existing newsletter to a larger audience for more awareness.

While there is merit in evaluating my performance based on the system of measurement outlined by the USDA regulation 4040-430, as a CEDT, there may be value in tailored metrics evaluating my preparedness to compete for CED. Through an outcomes-driven evaluation accounting for quantitative values such as the number of new clients serviced, publications requested, and customer satisfaction, we would gauge my knowledge of what programs the FSA and the USDA possess and my successes promoting and implementing them. Ideally, this multifaceted evaluation of quantitative and qualitative metrics would prove my value to the FSA and those individuals at the forefront of feeding America.

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