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*Farm Service Agency*

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**PRESENTED AT THE 74<sup>TH</sup> PROFESSIONAL AGRICULTURAL WORKERS  
CONFERENCE, 2016, THE JAMES HILL MEMORIAL PLENARY SESSION**

**SUCCESSSES, CHALLENGES, AND FUTURE: FARM SERVICE AGENCY  
IN ALABAMA**

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Good Morning! Thank you Dr. Hill; I certainly appreciate the opportunity to be here with you and I am also glad to have my colleagues, Fred and Wilfred, here. It is a great opportunity again to be a part of this great conference. I will not tell you how many times that I have attended, but they have been many, and the conferences have always been good. Dr. Hill has given us our assignments and I want to be obedient to that; what have been the successes, what have been the challenges, and where do we see the Farm Service Agency in the future?

Well, I must say that I am very grateful to have forty plus years of creditable service with the Farm Service Agency. For two and a half of those years I was a State Executive Director under the Clinton Administration, and for seven of those years, I have been a State Executive Director with the Obama Administration. I have seen a lot; I have seen the good and the bad, but I want to talk about what I consider one of our greatest successes since my return in 2009. We have constantly seen an increase in a diverse workforce not only out in the field offices but also at our headquarters in Montgomery, the State Office. This was achieved through outreach in our recruitment efforts ensuring that we had a well diverse pool of applicants. Besides announcing vacancies in our normal way of placing them in the newspapers and US jobs, we challenged our hiring managers and our other support staff to go a little beyond that and contact minority groups, pastors, community leaders, HBCUs, and other USDA agencies to share those announcements, and they, in turn, should share with their contacts. We think that it has certainly paid off.

We looked at our landscape, and we were aware that there was a need to not only reach out to minority groups but also to include all individuals in the make-up of our workforce. As of this date, we have hired eight disabled veterans, as well as Hispanic Americans, Native Americans, and African Americans. Of equal importance is the spread of diversity. The diversity is spread across all professional levels. We have increased our farm loan staff with African Americans from three to eleven, and our state office staff has gone up from four to eleven. One of the central themes that I have heard throughout my career, and particularly since I came back in 2009, are the many complaints from farmers that they were not receiving proper service from the USDA offices and they wanted a more diverse workforce. I think we have achieved this goal. Also, and for the first time, the State Executive Director was very proactive in selecting our state committee. So, I think we had a very diverse group of state committee members led by our chairperson Dr. Walter Hill. A geographical distribution of those individuals with various experiences in farming activities. We have been fortunate to address many issues that have come before us. So that again ties in with what diversity can do when you have someone that has been there and can put him or herself in the position of the one who has come to the board for assistance.

Another issue I think that we are proud of and see a drastic reduction in is discrimination. For many years, the Farm Service Agency and many other USDA Agencies were labeled as agencies

that discriminate based on race, gender, and all the other prohibited factors and that was why we had so many lawsuits (Black, Native American, women, and Hispanic farmer lawsuits) that captivated the minds of the policymakers. Through efforts of developing a diverse well-trained and culturally sensitive workforce, there is a system in place with fewer discrimination accusations. In those cases, where we see a few issues come up, we have been proactive. I have personally gone to those individuals, sat down and talked to them and asked, “what’s going on” and many times we are able to work it out just through conversation. Sometimes, it was just a misunderstanding, or they had a wrong approach; a “soft no” is better than a “blatant no.”

Another issue has to do with our big challenge with our farm loan program. When I came back in 2009, we were not making as many loans as we should make. We were very tight with money; it was like you almost had to have A-1 credit before our staff would advance loans. They were very tight with money; it was almost as if it was theirs. So our job was to try and change that mindset. We decided to have a farm loan summit and brought all the staff into the office and we laid out the reports of what we had achieved. It showed the numbers of loans we had made, and it also showed the delinquent rates. Our delinquent rates were substantially lower than the commercial making loans to the super good credit people, not taking a risk on those who may have had some issues. Mind you the farmers that come to us are in financial stress regardless; they already have problems. Our job was to find a way to ensure that those farmers could benefit from us. Therefore, we challenged our staff to go the extra mile, to go out into the communities, disburse fact sheets, do training, and leave business cards. All this showed that we were trying to reach out again, trying to reclaim that perception that we were now in the business of making loans, or we want their business. In the meeting that we had, referred to above, we used the illustration of a car dealership. A car dealership has lots of cars on the yard, a room full of salespersons, and if the cars are not moving, some of those salespeople have to lose their jobs. Similarly, the Farm Service Agency says “if you are not making loans we do not need the loan personnel we have”, so it drove the point home. Also, when I had the opportunity to make a change in personnel we hired a super farm loan chief and I gave him the power that he needed because he had the same mindset that I had. It is good that when vacancies are filled, individuals who have the same vision as the leader are selected. In short, we were in the business of servicing again. Through that process we were able to, have a work-staff that felt like we had a job to do, our middle name was “service,” and we are were making loans.

Now to show how that worked out, in fiscal year 2016 we were recognized as being in the top five in the nation, of loan portfolio. We increased from \$50.7 million loans in 2012 to \$110 million in 2016. Since in 2009 we have gone from 354 loans with an obligation of \$43 million to the total of 768 loans with an obligation of a \$110.5 million; this has made a tremendous economic impact in rural Alabama and rural America. All this was achieved through the concerted effort of our farm loan program staff across the board. I am proud that together we achieved this outcome.

Now, the future of the Farm Service Agency. The Farm Service Agency known by various names has been around since 1933. Over the years, there have been several acronyms: Triple AAA (Agriculture Jessup Act), PMA (Production Marketing Act), and ASCS (Agriculture Stabilization Conservation Service); that was the name when I started working with USDA. It is a mouth full. One time I went to an office to conduct some business, and I was telling the lady who was helping me about the place where I worked. In the course of the conversation, she said, “where do you

work?” I said “ASCS” and she said, “what does that stand for?” and I said, “blah, blah, blah”; then she said, “that is okay just put ASCS.” Believe it or not, at one time we were Agriculture Stabilization Service; break out the initials it says “ASS” so once they (the administrators) found out that that was the name of a donkey, no sooner had the ink dried did they change the name. However, disregarding what the names have been, the structure of Farm Service Agency has always been to provide service and to administer farm programs. We have an excellent delivery system in place. We have offices in every state that serves every county. So every farm owner who wants service in any county can get service. The FSA may not have a physical office in his or her county, but he or she can get service. Because of that unique attribute, the Farm Service Agency has a great future ahead of itself. Farm bills will continue to be enacted, and the fluctuations in commodity prices dictate that the farmers will need government assistance. Disasters are also uncontrollable, and the Farm Service Agents are ready to help farmers when disasters occur. We are paying out hundreds of millions of dollars now because of the drought. Farm Service Agents administer several programs based on legislation, and it needs people to administer the programs, and we certainly have the mechanisms in place to do that. So I maintain that we have a great future. We have a proven record, everybody from the county level all the way up to the White House knows what Farm Service Agency has done. We work together with lots of community-based organizations, like the Federation of Southern Cooperatives. John Zippert has been one of our staunch supporters in making sure that Farm Service Agents are represented out there. We have programs that from which farmers can receive assistance. So, if I was a young FSA employee wondering about the future of my employer I would say, “do not worry you do your job; Farm Service Agency will be here to continue to serve farmers” and that is what we are all about. Thank you very much.