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USDA plans to trim Farm Service offices

By Elliott Minor

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ALBANY, Ga. - The Farm Service Agency, which connects farmers with federal payments and crop programs, is considering closing some of its county offices around the South, raising the ire of some farmers.

Alabama and Georgia have already submitted closure plans to agriculture officials in Washington, and Virginia is holding required public hearings on the proposed closing of nine of its 50 offices.

County FSA offices, established during the 1930s, are considered vital by many rural communities and farmers, and the agency faces fierce opposition anytime they are threatened.

The agency had to scrap plans to close more than one-third of its 2,346 county offices last year because of widespread opposition from lawmakers and farmers.

FSA renewed the effort this year by asking state offices to develop individual plans, based on local needs.

So far, 17 states have submitted plans, and Alaska has already closed two of its four offices.

After the plans are reviewed by agricultural officials, they will be presented to each state's congressional delegation. If the lawmakers approve, the FSA will then hold mandatory public hearings on the closings.

Georgia's plan calls for closing 16 of the state's 83 offices.

The offices are located in Dougherty, Greene, Pulaski, Seminole, Ware, Wheeler, Baker, Evens, Hall, Houston, Johnson, Lanier, Brantley, Walker and Coweta counties, along with another that serves both Irwin and Ben Hill counties, according to John Stone, spokesman for 9th District U.S. Rep. Charlie Norwood.

Alabama proposes closing five of its 49 offices, but plans to reopen one office that had been closed, officials said.

Jerry Heard, a peanut farmer who chairs the FSA committee in southwest Georgia's Baker County, has delivered a petition with 850 signatures to Georgia's two U.S. senators

and to 2nd District congressman Sanford Bishop, urging them to save the Baker County office, which he describes as one of Georgia's most efficient.

With all the adversity facing farmers these days, few are inclined to drive to another county to fill our forms.

"I know people don't want their offices closed," said Fort Valley peach grower Duke Lane Jr., chairman of Georgia's FSA state committee. "We're given a set of guidelines and as a state committee, we've got to follow them. It's not pleasant to tell someone your county office is going to close."

Much of Alabama and Georgia have been declared a drought disaster areas and farmers throughout the nation are struggling with low commodity prices and record-high costs for fuel, fertilizer and pesticides.

"Our local FSA office is our lifeline," Heard said. "If we didn't have the FSA offices in the state, farming would come to a standstill without these government payments. I don't know this year if we can make it with the government payments. I believe we're going to have more (invested) in this crop than we'll get back in payments and selling the crop."

Farmers rely on their local FSA offices and visit them often to submit reports and fill out forms that determine the amount they receive in federal crop payments. When there's an agricultural disaster, such as the drought that has resulted in 155 of Georgia's 159 counties being declared disaster areas, farmers go to their county FSA offices to document their losses and apply for assistance.

Steven Connelly, the FSA's deputy administrator for field operations in Washington, said the purpose of the consolidation is to improve efficiency and improve services.

"We have this fine balancing act at the FSA of being responsible to taxpayers and at the same time, making sure we provide the authorized benefits to the producer," he said.

Employees in the county offices are responsible for at least 30 agricultural programs, plus disaster programs. Information on managing the complex programs is contained in 17,000 pages of instructions, Connelly said.

Nationwide, some offices have no full-time person and some are considered "shared management" offices, meaning one person runs back and forth between two offices, he said.

"Our goal was not to reduce the number of employees, but to place them better so that we have the critical mass," he said. "It's the result of reductions in resources over the past four years. Over the long-term there could be some savings, but that's not what's driving it."

Irwin County farmer Armond Morris, chairman of the Georgia Peanut Commission, said the survival of Southern cotton, peanut and corn farmers depends on services provided by local FSA office and any closing should be carefully considered.

"There's a lot of reason FSA offices need to stay open and within driving distance of a farmer," Morris said. "If we've got to drive 50 or 75 miles, it could be an hour's drive both ways. That takes a lot of time during a farmers' busy season."

Elliott Minor has covered Georgia agriculture and rural issues for The Associated Press since 1984.