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Resources, Community, and  
Economic Development Division

B-260588

March 1, 1995

The Honorable Richard G. Lugar  
Chairman  
The Honorable Patrick J. Leahy  
Ranking Minority Member  
Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition,  
and Forestry  
United States Senate

The Honorable Pat Roberts  
Chairman  
The Honorable E (Kika) de la Garza  
Ranking Minority Member  
Committee on Agriculture  
House of Representatives

As mandated by the Federal Crop Insurance Reform and Department of Agriculture Reorganization Act of 1994,<sup>1</sup> we reviewed the extent to which women and members of minority groups are represented on community, county, and state committees of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service (ASCS).<sup>2</sup> These committees are responsible for overseeing the implementation of ASCS' farm programs and ensuring that participating producers comply with the program's requirements. Committee members are elected by eligible producers, including landowners, farm operators, sharecroppers, or tenants farming in a county, regardless of where they live. In order to be elected, a producer must reside in the community in which he or she is a candidate.

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<sup>1</sup>P.L. 103-354, sect. 305.

<sup>2</sup>Under the 1994 reorganization legislation, the functions performed by the former ASCS have been transferred to the new Consolidated Farm Service Agency (CFSA).

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Specifically, the act requires GAO to determine whether socially disadvantaged producers<sup>3</sup> are underrepresented on (1) community, county, or state committees or (2) local review committees because of racial, ethnic, or gender prejudice. The act also requires that we determine, if such underrepresentation exists, whether it inhibits or interferes with such producers' participation in USDA's programs.

As agreed with your Committees' staff, this correspondence contains information about the representation of disadvantaged producers on community, county, and state committees. We also plan to report subsequently on the extent to which these producers are represented on local review committees, as well as whether underrepresentation on all committees inhibits such producers from participating in departmental programs. USDA has a study under way to review these same issues of representation in more detail. As agreed with your staff, we will review the methodology of this study, monitor its progress, and report on its findings. The study is due in May 1995.

In summary, we found that socially disadvantaged producers are underrepresented on county and community committees.<sup>4</sup> Nationwide, minority producers account for almost 5 percent of the producers eligible to vote for committee members; however only 2.1 percent of the members of county committees came from a minority group. In some states, less than 1 percent of the eligible minority producers serve on county and community committees. Nationwide, women represent about 28 percent of the producers eligible to vote for committee members, yet only 5.7 percent of the members of county committees are women. Disparities could

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<sup>3</sup>According to the act, a socially disadvantaged producer is a "member of a group whose members have been subjected to racial, ethnic, or gender prejudice because of their identity as members of a group without regard to their individual qualities." USDA maintains statistics for the following groups: African Americans, Hispanics, Asian Americans, Native Americans, and women. We use "minority" to include male and female members of these groups. We also discuss women (minority and nonminority) separately.

<sup>4</sup>For the purpose of this report, we define underrepresentation to mean that the groups are not represented in proportion to their eligibility to vote in the elections for the county and community committees.

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be larger or smaller in specific counties. Because there may be several reasons for underrepresentation, no conclusions can be drawn from the data available as to whether the underrepresentation is caused by racial, ethnic, or gender prejudice.

Each of the three-to-five-member state committees has at least one minority or woman member appointed by the Secretary of Agriculture. As a result, minorities and women are assured of representation.

Over the years, USDA has taken some steps to increase the involvement of minorities and women on the community, county, and state committees. For example, it added minority advisers to the county committees, updated lists of eligible voters to include minorities and women, required that women be included on the slate of candidates for community and county committees if more than 5 percent of the eligible voters in the county are women, and commissioned a study to further examine the issue.

#### BACKGROUND

The responsibility for administering ASCS' programs is shared by 50 state and 3,052 county ASCS committees. The committees (1) implement regulations and procedures for the programs; (2) meet with ASCS' county employees and with producers to discuss new programs or changes in existing programs; (3) collect and compile basic data on individual farms; (4) establish allotments, bases, and yields for individual farms; (5) notify producers of allotments and certify results; (6) accept producers' applications for participation in price stabilizing programs for commodities; (7) process producers' requests for sharing the costs of complying with federal conservation programs; (8) process commodity, storage facility, and deficiency payments, and issue checks and commodity certificates; and (9) certify eligibility for payment and monitor compliance with payment limitations.

Each county committee consists of three members who serve for 3 years. Elections for the county committee vary depending on whether the county is a single community (generally a county with low population), or a county with multiple communities. In 2,043, or two-thirds of the nation's counties, the county is subdivided into multiple communities. In counties with multiple communities, three members and two alternates are elected to each community committee. The three members, but not the alternates,

along with the members of the county's other community committees, select representatives to the county committee. In single-community counties (1,009 counties), the eligible voters directly elect the members of the county committee.

MINORITIES AND WOMEN ARE  
UNDERREPRESENTED ON COUNTY  
AND COMMUNITY COMMITTEES

Minority and women producers are generally not represented on county and community committees in proportion to their eligibility to vote. According to USDA's December 1993 data--the latest available<sup>5</sup>--nationwide, of the producers who are eligible to vote, minorities make up 4.7 percent, but only 2.1 percent (191) of the 9,142 members of county committees are minorities.

Table 1 shows the 10 states with the largest number of minority producers who are eligible to vote. Over 75 percent of the eligible minority producers are from these 10 states. North Carolina, the state with the highest number of minority producers, 34,572 (10.9 percent of the producers eligible to vote), has only 1 elected minority county committee member out of 297. In New Mexico, where minorities represent 48 percent of the eligible voters, 38 of 96 county committee members (39.6 percent) are from a minority group.

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<sup>5</sup>More current data would have been available, but elections scheduled for December 1994 were postponed because of the passage of the Federal Crop Insurance Reform and Department of Agriculture Reorganization Act of 1994.

Table 1: Minority Producers' Representation on County Committees in the 10 States With the Highest Number of Eligible Minority Producers, 1993

State	Number of eligible minority producers	Number of county committee members who are minorities	Total number of county committee members	Percentage of those eligible to vote who are minorities	Percentage of county committee members who are minorities
North Carolina	34,572	1	297	10.9	0.3
Texas	33,221	32	764	5.4	4.2
Mississippi	28,652	1	245	15.5	0.4
South Carolina	23,173	5	138	18.9	3.6
Montana	22,659	6	168	25.8	3.6
New Mexico	20,805	38	96	48.1	39.6
Arizona	19,316	13	47	66.9	27.7
Virginia	17,669	8	288	10.5	2.8
Alabama	15,573	0	203	9.0	0
Georgia	11,880	10	477	6.9	2.1

Source: USDA.

National and state statistics can mask greater disparities in specific counties. For example, in one Arizona county, 70 percent of the producers eligible to vote are minorities, but no member of a minority group sits on the county committee. Enclosure 1 gives details of minority representation on county committees in all the states.

On the other hand, the presence of a sizeable number of minorities farming in a community does not necessarily mean that they can be elected to the county committee. For example, if a producer resides in one county but farms or has a farm located in an adjacent county, he or she can vote in the adjacent county's election but cannot be elected to serve as a member of that county's committee.

Similarly, women producers are generally not represented on county committees in proportion to their eligibility to vote. Nationwide, women represent about 28 percent of the producers eligible to vote, but only 525 (5.7 percent) of the 9,142 members of county committees are women. Enclosure 2 gives details on the extent to which women are represented on county committees in all the states.

On the community committees, minorities and women are also generally not represented in proportion to their eligibility to vote. In 1992, minorities accounted for only 295 (1.2 percent) of the 25,334 members of community committees nationwide. Women were elected to 2,108 (8.3 percent) of these positions. In counties with multiple communities, these community committees select the members of the county committee.

In contrast, minorities and women are generally represented as alternates on community committees in proportion to their eligibility to vote. However, as alternates they cannot select the members of the county committee. In 1992, minorities accounted for 1,130 (5.7 percent) of the 19,779 alternates on community committees nationwide. Women were elected to 6,956 (over 35 percent) of these positions.

USDA HAS IDENTIFIED PROBLEMS  
WITH REPRESENTATION AND  
TAKEN SOME ACTIONS

USDA has recognized that minorities and women are not represented on county and community committees in proportion to their eligibility to vote. USDA has appointed minority advisers, required that minorities and women be included in the list of candidates for election under certain conditions, updated voting lists to include minorities and women, and commissioned a study to further examine the issue. Furthermore, the Federal Crop Insurance Reform and Department of Agriculture Reorganization Act of 1994 provides the Secretary with new authorities that could affect these groups' representation on future committees.

In the late 1970s, USDA decided that in counties where minority producers make up 10 percent or more of those eligible to vote in committee elections, county committees must appoint a member of a minority group as an adviser if no minority member has been elected to the county committee. During the mid-1980s, USDA reduced this percentage to 5 percent. The minority adviser to the

county committee is responsible for (1) increasing minority producers' awareness of and participation in ASCS activities, including elections, to ensure that the minority group's problems and viewpoints are understood and considered in ASCS' actions; (2) helping to develop interest and incentives in the minority community for considering work with ASCS as a career; (3) addressing the county committee on administrative and program matters; (4) actively soliciting minority and women candidates for nomination during the election process; (5) meeting with the county committee at each session, including executive sessions; and (6) participating in all deliberations (but not voting). A USDA official stated that appointing minority advisers to committees is a way of ensuring that the views, needs, and concerns of minorities are brought to the table, considered, and dealt with appropriately.

If minorities represent 5 percent or more of the eligible voters within a county, ASCS requires that a minority candidate be included on the slate of candidates for the (1) community committee in counties with multiple communities or (2) county committee in single-community counties. In March 1990, USDA added a similar requirement for women.

Studies by ASCS found that Native Americans were casting one vote per tribe regardless of the number of eligible voters. In February 1994, ASCS issued revised regulations to clarify that all Native Americans living on a reservation and engaged in agricultural production are eligible to vote in county committee elections. Other USDA memorandums direct the state and county committees to update the list of eligible voters to accurately reflect the diversity of producers in the communities.

According to ASCS' internal management evaluation reports on certain county operations, county executive directors and county committees give little attention to outreach efforts. For example, Spanish-speaking producers do not receive written information in Spanish, and county executive directors do not visit Native American groups to help them understand ASCS' programs. These reports also question whether the minority advisers are attuned to the problems and concerns of the members of the communities they represented.

The Federal Crop Insurance Reform and Department of Agriculture Reorganization Act of 1994 gives the Secretary of Agriculture new authority to decide how the elections

for county and community committees are conducted. Also, the committees may now have up to five elected members, instead of three. As a result of this legislation, the Secretary may be in a position to change election procedures in a way that alters the composition of these committees during the next election, now scheduled for late 1995.

In 1994, USDA let a contract with a private management consulting firm to conduct a review of the participation of all producers in ASCS' programs and an analysis of the Equal Employment Opportunity complaint process, with a view toward improving the participation of minorities and women in ASCS' programs. The study will also examine, among other things, whether minority and women producers are receiving treatment that differs from that of nonminorities. The study is expected to be submitted to USDA in May 1995. As agreed with the Committees' staff, we will review this study's methodology, progress, and final report.

#### AGENCY COMMENTS

We discussed the information in this correspondence with ASCS' Director of Equal Employment Opportunity and Civil Rights. This official generally agreed with the information discussed. He provided some clarifying comments that we have incorporated into the correspondence where appropriate.

#### SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

To understand how ASCS' election and voting procedures work, we reviewed USDA's statutes, regulations, and guidelines and discussed voting procedures with officials in Washington, D.C., and a local ASCS county office. We discussed the objectives of ASCS' programs with USDA officials and reviewed management reviews from ASCS' Equal Employment Opportunity and Civil Rights office. We reviewed previous studies from USDA's Economic Research Service and from the Environmental Working Group, an environmental group.

We obtained lists of producers eligible to vote in the elections for ASCS' county committees and the membership rosters of the county and community committees from ASCS' files. However, some producers who should be eligible to vote were not on the voting lists. Although we used these data, we did not verify their accuracy and completeness.

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The USDA data we reviewed proved insufficient for determining the possible reasons for underrepresentation on committees. Therefore, no conclusions can be drawn from the data available as to whether the underrepresentation of disadvantaged producers is caused by racial, ethnic, or gender prejudice.

We conducted our work from November 1994 through February 1995 using generally accepted government auditing standards.

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We are sending copies of this correspondence to the Secretary of Agriculture. We will also make copies available to others on request.

Please call me at (202) 512-5138 if you or your staff have any questions about this correspondence.



John W. Harman  
Director, Food and  
Agriculture Issues

Enclosures - 2

MINORITY REPRESENTATION ON COUNTY COMMITTEES

State	Committee members		Minorities eligible to vote (%)	Minorities on county committee (%)
	Minority	Total		
Alabama	0	203	9.0	0
Alaska	0	12	72.2	0
Arizona	13	47	66.9	27.7
Arkansas	2	225	5.2	0.9
California	5	170	3.9	2.9
Colorado	7	175	3.0	4.0
Connecticut	0	21	0.3	0
Delaware	0	9	1.2	0
Florida	1	196	7.8	0.5
Georgia	10	477	6.9	2.1
Hawaii	9	12	46.2	75.0
Idaho	2	129	2.2	1.6
Illinois	0	306	0.1	0
Indiana	0	276	0.2	0
Iowa	0	300	0.1	0
Kansas	2	315	0.3	0.6
Kentucky	0	360	1.2	0
Louisiana	8	183	6.9	4.4
Maine	0	48	0.2	0
Maryland	0	70	1.8	0
Massachusetts	1	39	0.3	2.6
Michigan	0	249	0.3	0
Minnesota	0	269	0.1	0
Mississippi	1	245	15.5	0.4
Missouri	0	341	0.3	0
Montana	6	168	25.8	3.6
Nebraska	1	278	0.1	0.4

State	Committee members		Minorities eligible to vote (%)	Minorities on county committee (%)
	Minority	Total		
Nevada	4	51	12.5	7.8
New Hampshire	0	24	0.2	0
New Jersey	0	48	1.5	0
New Mexico	38	96	48.1	39.6
New York	0	164	0.3	0
North Carolina	1	297	10.9	0.3
North Dakota	0	159	0.8	0
Ohio	0	267	0.2	0
Oklahoma	23	231	3.3	10.0
Oregon	2	106	5.5	1.9
Pennsylvania	0	197	0.1	0
Rhode Island	0	15	0.1	0
South Carolina	5	138	18.9	3.6
South Dakota	4	199	1.8	2.0
Tennessee	2	285	2.6	0.7
Texas	32	764	5.4	4.2
Utah	0	87	15.5	0
Vermont	0	42	0.2	0
Virginia	8	288	10.5	2.8
Washington	1	116	1.1	0.9
West Virginia	0	159	0.2	0
Wisconsin	3	216	0.1	1.4
Wyoming	0	70	1.1	0
Total	191	9,142	4.7	2.1

Source: USDA.

REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN ON COUNTY COMMITTEES

State	County committee		Women eligible to vote (%)	Women on county committee (%)
	Women	Total		
Alabama	7	203	22.1	3.4
Alaska	2	12	79.8	16.7
Arizona	4	47	26.0	8.5
Arkansas	3	225	17.7	1.3
California	22	170	21.0	12.9
Colorado	21	175	26.2	12.0
Connecticut	1	21	13.4	4.8
Delaware	0	9	27.4	0
Florida	19	196	23.2	9.7
Georgia	32	477	23.0	6.7
Hawaii	1	12	13.5	8.3
Idaho	14	129	35.5	10.9
Illinois	5	306	24.7	1.6
Indiana	10	276	21.3	3.6
Iowa	3	300	27.2	1.0
Kansas	38	315	35.5	12.1
Kentucky	26	360	27.9	7.2
Louisiana	11	183	30.4	6.0
Maine	3	48	19.2	6.3
Maryland	4	70	25.0	5.7
Massachusetts	2	39	13.7	5.1
Michigan	9	249	18.5	3.6
Minnesota	11	269	19.2	4.1
Mississippi	5	245	29.7	2.0
Missouri	9	341	22.7	2.6
Montana	11	168	39.1	6.5
Nebraska	13	278	38.2	4.7

State	County committee		Women eligible to vote (%)	Women on county committee (%)
	Women	Total		
Nevada	10	51	39.4	19.6
New Hampshire	2	24	15.6	8.3
New Jersey	1	48	11.2	2.1
New Mexico	5	96	33.1	5.2
New York	3	164	14.4	1.8
North Carolina	5	297	34.4	1.7
North Dakota	13	159	31.8	8.2
Ohio	10	267	22.7	3.7
Oklahoma	3	231	24.2	1.3
Oregon	17	106	22.5	16.0
Pennsylvania	10	197	20.4	5.1
Rhode Island	2	15	14.3	13.3
South Carolina	2	138	28.6	1.4
South Dakota	6	199	39.1	3.0
Tennessee	14	285	22.8	4.9
Texas	59	764	39.7	7.7
Utah	7	87	22.8	8.0
Vermont	8	42	22.8	19.0
Virginia	13	288	29.2	4.5
Washington	16	116	37.3	13.8
West Virginia	12	159	24.0	7.5
Wisconsin	14	216	28.9	6.5
Wyoming	7	70	31.2	10.0
Total	525	9,142	27.9	5.7

Source: USDA.

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