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Agency's Tomorrow Returns to Yesterday

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Just yesterday a story on this page reported that farm-state lawmakers were working hard to scuttle an administration plan to close nearly a third of the Farm Service Agency's 2,351 county offices.

So hard, it turned out, that a top Agriculture Department official notified Congress yesterday that the USDA was "setting aside" the plan, known as "FSA Tomorrow." The plan was announced Sept. 23, less than one month ago.

The USDA's abrupt retreat, in the face of implacable resistance from key members of Congress, was announced in a letter from Undersecretary for Farm Programs J. B. Penn to Sen. Saxby Chambliss (R-Ga.), chairman of the Agriculture Committee.

"We recognize that opposition has developed to this comprehensive process of state-by-state review," Penn wrote. But he called for continued dialogue with Congress on how best to modernize the FSA.

The FSA, with nearly 13,000 employees and a budget of \$1.2 billion, manages programs that distribute more than \$20 billion a year in subsidy payments and loans to farmers. Offices in almost every county in the nation link farmers and myriad farm and conservation programs.

Penn noted in his letter that among the reasons for the new plan was the fact that nearly 500 offices are within 20 miles of another office, and more than 110 have only one full-time employee. "Properly equipped, better trained, fully-staffed offices will provide superior support to farmers and ranchers," he wrote.

The quick reversal was a stunning example of the often underestimated political power of farm and rural interests in Congress.

Farm state lawmakers hailed the action and rushed to take credit.

Sen. James M. Talent (R-Mo.), who sponsored a Senate amendment that would have blocked the FSA Tomorrow program for at least a year, called the announcement "tremendous news for our producers."

Chambliss said the USDA had failed to demonstrate that FSA Tomorrow would mean better service for farmers.

Sen. Mark Pryor (R-Ark.), whose state's rice growers depend heavily on subsidies administered by the FSA, claimed credit for saving 22 of the state's 62 FSA offices.

The plan triggered a grass-roots backlash in hundreds of communities. Battling it, for example, was the 8,000-member National Association of Farmer Elected Committees, a little-known but politically potent group that represents farmers who oversee county FSA offices.

-- Dan Morgan