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Staffing Trends in the USDA Farm Production and Conservation (FPAC) Mission Area

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) administers federal farm and conservation programs primarily through three agencies: the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), the Farm Service Agency (FSA), and the Risk Management Agency (RMA). All three agencies have experienced staffing declines over the last 20 years. Many in Congress have expressed general concern over USDA staffing levels in annual appropriations statements and oversight hearings. This report analyzes available data on NRCS, FSA, and RMA staffing levels. Issues related to total staffing levels—such as funding, workload analysis, and capacity—are not discussed.

Available Data

All staffing data in this In Focus were obtained directly from the annual President’s budget explanatory notes that are published by USDA (see <https://www.obpa.usda.gov/>). Unless otherwise stated, only data listed as *actual* are included and are from the most recent year that each data point was available.

This In Focus includes two types of staffing level data—*staff years* and *end-of-year* staff levels. A *staff year* is the equivalent of one full-time person working for one year. *End-of-year* (EOY) staff levels are calculated based on a point in time, which in the case of USDA is the end of the fiscal year (September 30). Both *staff year* and *EOY* provide useful information about an agency’s staffing levels.

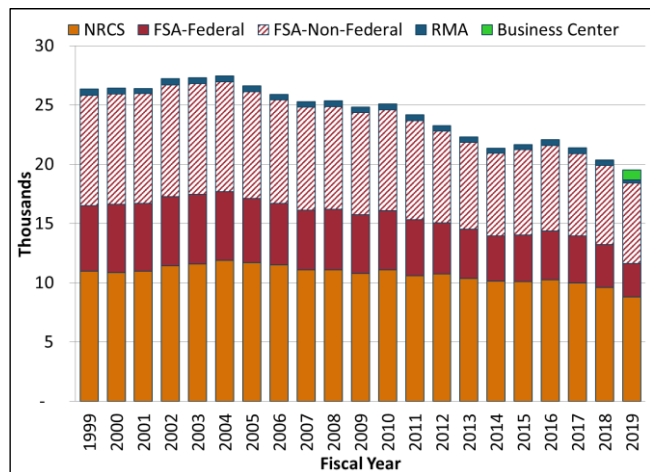
Creation of FPAC

In 2017, USDA created the Farm Production and Conservation (FPAC) mission area as part of a larger departmental reorganization. FPAC includes NRCS, FSA, RMA, and a new FPAC Business Center. Under the new FPAC structure, certain administrative functions and personnel were further reallocated from FSA, RMA, and NRCS into the new FPAC Business Center. The Business Center is responsible for certain overarching management and technology-related operations of the three agencies.

FPAC Staffing

Total staffing at agencies currently in the FPAC mission area has declined by 29% from FY2004 to FY2019 (from 27,429 to 19,511; **Figure 1**). Hiring freezes in 2017 that continued into 2018 further reduced staffing, even as the FPAC Business Center was created and staff were shifted from the component agencies. Since the end of 2016, which was a recent high-level staffing year, FPAC mission area staffing during the current Administration has steadily declined, decreasing by nearly 12% (from 22,051 in FY2016 to 19,511 in FY2019; **Figure 1**).

Figure 1. FPAC Mission Area Staffing
Permanent, Full-Time Staff Positions, EOY



Source: CRS, using USDA, *Budget Explanatory Notes*, “Permanent Positions by Grade and Staff Year,” various issues FY2001-FY2021.

The Administration’s FY2021 budget proposes to increase hiring for the FPAC Business Center. However, combined staffing in NRCS, RMA, and FSA (permanent federal staff only, since estimates for total FSA staffing were not available) is not proposed to increase through FY2021.

Natural Resources Conservation Service

NRCS is the primary federal agency providing agricultural conservation technical and financial assistance to private landowners. The majority (98% in FY2019) of NRCS staff are located throughout the country in state, county, and technical offices.

From FY2004 to FY2018, NRCS staffing has declined by 19% (from 11,886 to 9,605; **Figure 2**). The FPAC realignment in FY2019 transferred about 880 staff years from NRCS to the Business Center. This was over 9% of effective NRCS staff years at the time. If the FY2020 estimate for total NRCS permanent, full-time positions is realized, it would represent a 27% decline from FY2019. This is a further reduction from the previous year’s Business Center realignment. USDA intends to reverse most of this decline with additional hiring in FY2021, according to the FY2021 budget proposal.

NRCS has also maintained a balance of unfilled permanent positions for the past 20 years. Unfilled positions hit a high mark from FY2012 through FY2018 when they ranged between close to 900 to over 2,500. Unfilled positions declined in FY2019 to 363 but increase six-fold in the FY2020 estimate to 2,312 (**Figure 2**).

Farm Service Agency

FSA administers many of the agricultural support programs, including farm loans, commodity support, and disaster assistance. Similar to NRCS, the majority (99% in FY2019) of FSA staff are located in state- and county-level offices. FSA includes two staffing categories—*federal* and *non-federal*. Federal FSA positions are considered career civil service positions. Non-federal FSA positions are not part of the civil service and are neither in the competitive nor excepted service. Non-federal positions are employees of local elected FSA county committees. Both federal and non-federal positions are considered FSA employees and are paid with federal funds.

From FY2002 to FY2018, total FSA staffing declined by 33% from 15,267 to 10,287 (Figure 3). The FY2019 FPAC realignment transferred approximately 915 FSA staff to the Business Center. Nearly all staff transferred were federal FSA employees, representing nearly 25% of those staff at the time. Non-federal FSA staffing, largely outside of DC and not realigned to the Business Center, have also declined by 28% from a high of 9,413 in FY2002 to 6,781 in FY2019, including 6% from the recent high-level staffing year of FY2016.

Unlike NRCS, FSA has maintained a relatively small number of unfilled positions. However, at the end of FY2019, about 16% of available permanent federal positions were unfilled. The Administration intends to reduce unfilled positions and increase staffing by the end of FY2020, according to the FY2021 budget proposal.

Risk Management Agency

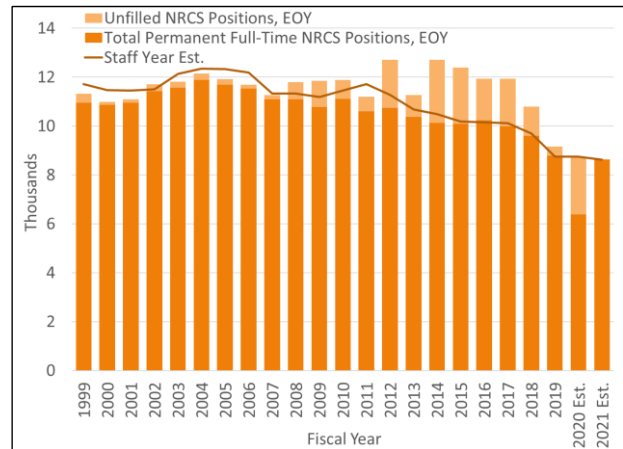
RMA manages the federal crop insurance program and operates with fewer staff compared to FSA and NRCS. RMA staffing levels have remained steadier through FY2018 than NRCS or FSA (Figure 4). Realignment of the Business Center and increased unfilled positions have reduced RMA-specific staffing in FY2019.

FPAC Business Center

To realign funding and staff to the Business Center, Congress reduced funding for NRCS, FSA, and RMA in FY2019. By the end of FY2020, USDA intends that the FPAC realignment will result in the transfer of nearly 1,900 staff into the FPAC Business Center, including about 915 from FSA, 882 from NRCS, and 82 from RMA (USDA, *FY2020 Budget Explanatory Notes*, “FPAC Business Center,” p. 23-5). At the end of FY2019, the Business Center employed an estimated 1,340 staff years.

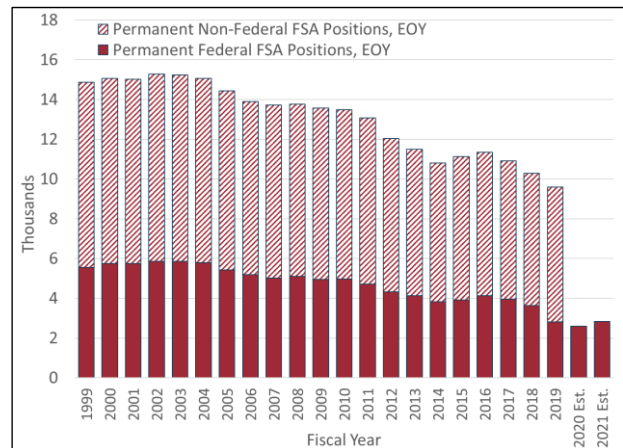
The transfer of staff, funding, and functions are a part of the Business Center’s goal to achieve operational efficiencies (Government Accountability Office, “More Could Be Done to Assess Effectiveness and Impact of Business Centers”). It is unclear whether these efficiencies have been achieved. Also unclear is how the Business Center realignment and reduction in overall FSA, NRCS, and RMA staffing may be affecting the ability of the agencies to carry out their core missions.

Figure 2. NRCS Staffing



Source: CRS, using USDA, *Budget Explanatory Notes*, “Permanent Positions by Grade and Staff Year,” various issues FY2001-FY2021.

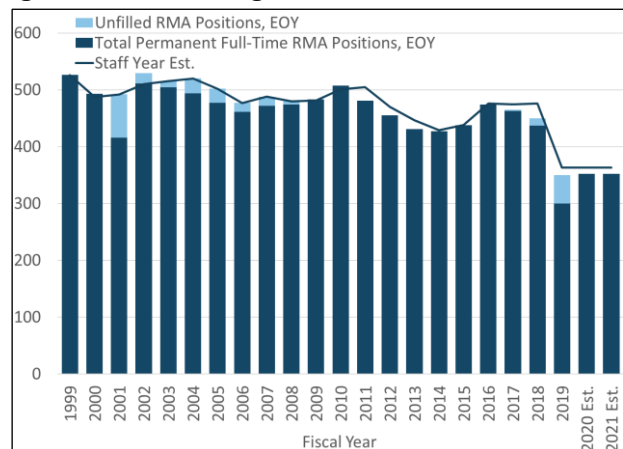
Figure 3. FSA Federal and Non-Federal Staffing



Source: CRS, using USDA, *Budget Explanatory Notes*, “Agency-wide, End of Year totals,” various issues FY2001-FY2021.

Note: Estimates for FY2020-FY2021 for non-federal staff are unavailable.

Figure 4. RMA Staffing



Source: CRS, using USDA, *Budget Explanatory Notes*, “Permanent Positions by Grade and Staff Year,” various issues FY2001-FY2021.

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