

# **MISSION CHANGE IN A FEDERAL AGENCY AND ITS LINK TO EMPLOYEE TRANSFER PREFERENCES**

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*Little research has been done on employee desire to transfer jobs within public sector organizations. This article explores the factors that explain this behavior for a large sample (N = 1248) of employees in the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). These factors include, for example, mission change, employee burnout, and staffing levels. The findings indicate that radical mission change, among other variables, significantly influences the desire of employees to transfer jobs within the agency.*

**Keywords:** *mission change; employee job transfer; burnout; job satisfaction*

**On September 11, 2001**, the World Trade Center buildings in New York and the Pentagon building in Washington, D.C., were viscusly attacked by terrorists. The response by President George W. Bush and by Congress, in part, was to establish the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS), which involved a massive reorganization of 22 federal agencies, along with an examination of the missions and the roles of many of these organizations under the umbrella of DHS. The impact of these changes on both the security of the nation and the morale and productivity of the employees of the various agencies has yet to be explored. This article examines the impact of mission change on employee attitudes and behaviors within a federal agency outside the DHS. It may, therefore, provide some clues as to the potential challenges that bureau leaders brought under the direction of the DHS may face as they attempt to integrate what they do within the larger DHS mission. In particular, it may help bureau leaders prepare for some of the responses by employees, such as job transfers, to these changes.

The impact of mission change on employee performance, attitude, and behavior has received a great deal of attention in recent years (Burke & Litwin, 1992; Guzzo, Jette, & Katzell, 1985; Kinicki, Carson, & Bohlander, 1992; Neuman, Edwards, & Raju, 1989). Numerous academic studies have explored, for example, the effects of the reinventing-government initiatives on federal-agency employees (e.g., Gianakis & Davis, 1998; Kamensky, 1996; Thompson, 2000; Thompson & Ingraham, 1996). Other studies have explored the effects of devolution (e.g., Arsneault, 2000; Cole, Hissong, & Arvidson, 1999; Conlan, 1998; Crowley, 2000; Kettl, 2000; Schneider & Netting, 1999) and privatization (e.g., Hicks & Hofmann, 2000; Fanaras, 2000; Flanagan & Perkins, 1995; Stein, 1994) on state and local governments and their employees. This study adds to this growing body of literature by examining the impact of mandated change on organizational mission and employee behav-

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ior. More specifically, this study examines one effect of mandated mission change—employee desire to transfer jobs—using a sample of federal employees known as district conservationists (DCs) working for the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS), formerly known as the Soil Conservation Service (SCS).

The Conservation Title of the Food Security Act (FSA) of 1985 has been described as the most controversial piece of environmental legislation to ever confront the agricultural industry (Napier, 1990). The major components of the FSA have had a profound impact on the frontline operating officers of the NRCS—the agency with primary enforcement responsibilities under the law (Gabris & Ihrke, 1996). The FSA has in many ways changed the way the NRCS conducts itself in the natural resources arena, and some NRCS employees have found themselves feeling uneasy with their new enforcement responsibilities, which came about because of this law.

The literature on administrative discretion is helpful in understanding why some DCs may prefer to transfer to a non-DC job as a consequence of the negative effects of mission change in the NRCS. Works by Blau (1955) and Lipsky (1980), for example, indicate the ways in which administrators make use of discretion to control their environment, including the behavior of clients and of coworkers. This literature has shown that in regulatory situations, bureaucrats will often work informally with clients so that they can gain compliance on a voluntary rather than a coercive basis. This type of behavior is predictable in agencies where regulation is part of everyday life for employees (Blau, 1955; Hunter & Waterman, 1996; Lipsky, 1980; Ringquist, 1995; Yin & Yates, 1975). In the case of the NRCS, however, the tradition has been one of voluntary compliance by the very nature of the agency's mission. Up until the passage of the FSA, enforcement of environmental regulations was not part of the standard operating procedures of DCs. Some DCs may not feel comfortable in shifting from a cooperative to a conflict-laden relationship with clients and may, therefore, decide to leave.

The purpose of this article is to therefore explore one of the results of this law in terms of its impact on NRCS-field-office personnel, in this case the district conservationist. District conservationists are responsible for the day-to-day implementation of the FSA and are located in field offices throughout the country with jurisdictions that roughly parallel county boundaries. These employees serve as the street-level bureaucrats of the NRCS, and they interact regularly with NRCS clients, primarily farmers and ranchers.

It is hypothesized in this article that the combined effect of a major change in agency mission, coupled with a change in the role of the DC, has significantly influenced DC behavior. More specifically, it is hypothesized that employee desire to transfer is significantly associated with changes in the NRCS mission and with the related affects of this mission change on the role responsibilities of DCs. This article then goes on to explore other causal factors that help explain DC desire to transfer to a non-DC job within the NRCS.

### **BACKGROUND OF THE FOOD SECURITY ACT (FSA)**

Throughout the history of the NRCS, the district conservationist has been the key representative of this New Deal agency. The historic role of the DC centered on providing technical assistance to NRCS clients (e.g., farmers and ranchers). The technical advisory approach to agricultural land management had its beginnings in the 1930s, when several small watershed programs were funded by Congress in a limited number of locations around the country. Under the small watershed programs, farmers and ranchers entered into agreements with

SCS with the goal of reducing the amount of sediment released into streams from fields on their farms. The means for achieving this goal varied depending on land conditions and other factors, but the primary emphasis was placed on developing and on implementing certain practices and projects that would reduce soil erosion. For example, many farmers began to rotate their crops from year to year. This practice, coupled with other projects such as building terraces on fields, helped to reduce soil erosion levels, and as a result, the amount of sediment draining from fields (Simms, 1970).

In return for implementing erosion-reducing practices and projects, SCS provided funding for the development of practices best suited for each region, along with funding for the construction and the engineering of antierosion projects on farms. The technical responsibilities of SCS under the small watershed programs fell into the hands of DCs, then referred to as area conservationists (Simms, 1970). Thus, the relationship between producers and SCS personnel during the early years of the agency was one based on working together toward the common goal of reducing soil erosion on farms in a limited number of areas.

Over the course of the next 50 years, SCS expanded its programmatic base to such an extent that technical assistance was offered in nearly every county in the nation. The relationship forged between producers and DCs was one based on mutual respect and voluntary compliance. That is, those producers with an interest in conserving their land relied on the knowledge and the expertise of the DC to help them achieve this goal, while DCs enjoyed the opportunity to work with producers with a conservation ethic.

The passage of the Conservation Title of the FSA of 1985 changed the nature of this relationship. Under the FSA, producers receiving federal programmatic benefits (e.g., federal crop insurance, crop subsidies, etc.) were required to work with DCs to develop a conservation compliance plan for their farms and ranches. These plans constituted binding agreements between the producer and the federal government. District conservationists were then required to monitor producer behavior to ensure producers followed the requirements contained within those plans.

With the passage of the FSA, DC workloads significantly increased because they were required to meet with any and all producers receiving federal programmatic benefits, whereas prior to the passage of the FSA, DC workloads were confined to interactions with those producers who were voluntarily interested in reducing soil erosion on their farms. The nature of the work of DCs changed significantly as well. Although still required to employ their technical expertise in developing conservation plans, DCs also became responsible for monitoring producer behavior, a new role for these NRCS employees.

Previous research (e.g., Gabris & Ihrke, 1996; Ihrke, 1996) suggests DCs and agency leaders were unhappy with this new role. In fact, research published elsewhere indicates that the agency avoided a hard-line stance on the implementation of this law (Esseks, Kraft, Sullivan, & Dellinger, 1994), and it was documented that up to one third of responding DCs admitted to looking the other way after having gained knowledge of producer noncompliance. This type of response was consistent with the stance taken by agency leaders to work with producers as much as possible to bring them into compliance by both formal and informal means.

Thus, behaviors such as looking the other way in cases of noncompliance become crucial to understanding the full impact of this law on employee behavior. This research explores the impact of one aspect of DC discontent by attempting to determine the extent to which DC desire to transfer is based on the negative aspects of the FSA. What is significant about this research is that so many DCs expressed a desire to transfer jobs, even with the rather lukewarm stance by agency leaders on FSA implementation.

## LITERATURE AND HYPOTHESES

The literature on employee transfer is largely confined to analyses of private sector organizations (e.g., Brett, 1982; Brett & Reilly, 1988; Nakosteen & Zimmer, 1992). These studies have explored the causes, benefits, and consequences of employee transfer. However, Noe, Steffy, and Barber (1988) have explored desire-to-transfer behavior in a state agency located in the Midwest. This study adds to the literature on employee desire to transfer by examining this behavior within a federal agency.

Various research studies have explored the likelihood of employee transfer based on a number of factors including willingness to transfer (Brett & Werbel, 1980; Gould & Penley, 1985), demographic characteristics (Brett & Reilly, 1988; Gould & Penley, 1985; Marshall & Cooper, 1976; Sell, 1983), spousal attitudes toward transfer (Brett & Werbel, 1980; Hill & Miller, 1978; Kantor, 1977; Marshall & Cooper, 1976; Minor, 1982), job involvement (Brett & Reilly, 1988; Gould & Penley, 1985; Hill & Miller, 1978;), and job satisfaction (Brett & Reilly, 1988). These studies are largely confined to employee transfers initiated by private sector employers; that is, in situations where the employer asked the employee to transfer. Very few studies have examined transfers initiated by employees, particularly in the public sector.

Other research studies have explored the benefits and the consequences of employee transfer, again largely confined to private sector organizations. For example, Dalton and Mesch (1992) examined the impact of employee-initiated transfer on absenteeism for two cohorts of employees in separate organizations. Models of employee turnover (e.g., Baysinger & Mobley, 1984; Gustafson, 1982; Mobley, 1977) also acknowledge the importance of employee-initiated transfers in understanding this phenomenon. Dalton and Tudor (1987) found the highest turnover rates were associated with those individuals who requested transfers but were not accommodated, whereas more modest levels of turnover were found for those allowed to transfer.

This study attempts to fill the void in the literature on employee transfer in the public sector. More specifically, this study will examine employee desire to transfer based on the negative aspects of mission change, along with other related factors, which will be discussed in the paragraphs that follow.

District conservationists had and continue to have a range of transfer options available within the NRCS. One option is to transfer to an administrative position at one of the state offices. Another option—technically a promotion—is to move in to an area conservationist position and become the supervisor of a number of DCs. Not all DCs can take advantage of these options because of limited availability at any given time. Thus, the process of transferring within the agency has the potential to become highly competitive.

Given the nature of the NRCS over the period of study, a number of variables need to be explored in terms of their relationships to DC desire to transfer to a non-DC job within the NRCS because of the negative effects of the FSA. These variables include burnout, job satisfaction, leadership, employee attitudes and experiences, and willingness to transfer.

### **Desire to Transfer and the Effects of the FSA**

The dependent variable in this analysis measures the extent to which DC desire to transfer to a non-DC job is based on the negative aspects of the FSA. It is hypothesized that some DCs will express a desire to transfer to a non-DC job within the agency and, furthermore, that

some of those wishing to transfer will associate this desire with the negative aspects of the FSA.

### **Burnout**

Previous research by Gabris and Ihrke (1996) and Ihrke (1996) indicates burnout is an important part of the DC experience. These scholars have shown that DCs were experiencing higher-than-average levels of burnout when compared to norms established for the public sector (Golembiewski, Boudreau, Munzenrider, & Luo, 1996) and that burnout in the NRCS was largely explained by various changes in DC work routines brought about by the FSA. Research in other settings has shown burnout to be associated with various elements of individual and organizational dis-ease. For example, a number of studies (Aldinger, 1993; Golembiewski & Munzenrider, 1988; Golembiewski, Munzenrider, Scherb, & Billingsley, 1992) indicates burnout to be associated with psychosomatic complaints by employees. Consistent with this research, Shelledy, Mikles, May and Youtsey (1992) found burnout to be positively associated with employee turnover, absenteeism, and intent to leave the field among a sample of respiratory-care workers. In this research, it is hypothesized that burnout is an intervening variable between negative experience and desire to transfer. In other words, because the experience-burnout relationship has already been established, it is hypothesized that burnout will be a significant predictor of desire to transfer.

### **Job Satisfaction**

There are a number of different ways in which employee job satisfaction can be measured. Examples include satisfaction with pay (Lee & Wilber, 1985; Schwab & Wallace, 1974), benefits (Bergmann, Bergmann, & Grahn, 1994), staffing (Ihrke, 1996), and general satisfaction with the job (Durst & DeSantis, 1997; Jayaratne, 1993). For this research, two measures of job satisfaction were examined. The first attempts to measure DC satisfaction with NRCS field-office staffing levels. Many DCs indicated in focus-group meetings that the agency did not increase staffing levels to meet the corresponding increase in workload levels due to the FSA (Ihrke, 1996). The second measure pertains to general DC job satisfaction. Shelledy, Mikles, May, and Youtsey (1992) found in their research a negative association between elements of job satisfaction (i.e., with work, pay, promotions, and supervision) and intent to leave the field of respiratory care. It is hypothesized that as DC job satisfaction increases, the likelihood of DC desire to transfer being associated with the negative aspects of the FSA decreases.

### **Leadership**

Gabris and Mitchell (1991) suggest that the importance of leadership credibility has received too little attention in the literature on employee behavior. Research by Gabris and Ihrke (2000) has shown leadership credibility to be associated with employee acceptance and employee satisfaction with a number of different human-resource systems (e.g., performance appraisal and merit pay). For this research, it is hypothesized that as leader credibility increases, the likelihood of DC desire to transfer being associated with the negative aspects of the FSA decreases.

### **Employee Attitudes and Experiences**

Employee attitudes toward work have been examined in a number of research studies on employee transfer. These attitudes include job involvement and employee identification with the agency or company. Gould and Penley (1985) found a negative correlation between job involvement and willingness to relocate, whereas Brett and Reilly (1988) found a positive correlation. Brett and Werbel (1980) found employees who identified more closely with their employers were more willing to transfer than those who did not identify with their employers. Conversely, Brett and Reilly (1988) found no relationship between company identification and employee willingness to transfer. For this research, a surrogate measure of company identification was employed. District conservationists were asked whether the provisions of the FSA maintained the integrity of the NRCS mission of providing technical assistance to producers interested in conserving land. Those DCs who feel the FSA maintains the integrity of the NRCS mission are the ones who maintain a strong identification with the agency. Those responding that the FSA is an extension of the NRCS mission will, more than likely, express that their desire to transfer has little to do with the negative aspects of the FSA.

The experiences of DCs, like their attitudes, are important to consider when attempting to understand their behavior. It is hypothesized that positive experiences of DCs in implementing the law will be negatively associated with DC desire to transfer because of the negative aspects of the FSA. Specifically, it is hypothesized that the more DCs perceive the FSA has had a positive effect on producer relations, the less they will attribute their desire to transfer to the negative aspects of the FSA. It is also hypothesized that DCs who have knowledge of non-complying producers will be more likely to attribute transfer desire to the FSA than those who do not have knowledge of noncomplying producers.

### **Willingness to Transfer**

A number of studies (Brett & Reilly, 1988; Brett & Werbel, 1980; Gould & Penley, 1985) indicates willingness to transfer (or relocate) is a primary predictor of whether an employee will accept or reject a job transfer. In this research, willingness to transfer is hypothesized to be positively associated with desire to transfer because of the negative aspects of the FSA.

## **DESIGN AND METHOD**

Data for this study were obtained from a 41-page survey administered to a sample of approximately 1,200 DCs working in field offices throughout the four NRCS administrative regions: West, South, Midwest, and Northeast (see Appendix for questions used in this analysis). The sample was drawn in such a manner as to ensure generalizability at both the regional and the national levels (See Data and Methodology box). These data, collected confidentially during the spring of 1994, were used to explore a number of problematic issues for DCs with regard to the implementation of the FSA.

The original purpose of the study was to "examine the effects on SCS District Conservationists caused by the implementation of the Food Security Act" (Esseks & Kraft, 1994). The researchers who developed the questionnaire hoped, in part, to measure the frustrations and their causes as experienced by DCs in implementing the FSA. This article attempts to examine one area of concern relating to the FSA implementation: the extent to which DC desire to transfer is based on the negative aspects of this law.

**TABLE 1: DC Desire to Transfer to a Non-DC Job Within the NRCS**

<i>Response</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>%</i>
Yes	526	50.5
No	515	49.5
Missing	44	—
Total	1085	100.0

NOTE: DC = district conservationist; NRCS = Natural Resource Conservation Service.

**TABLE 2: Extent to Which the FSA Influences DC Desire to Transfer**

<i>Response</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>%</i>
Nothing to do with the negative aspects of the FSA	122	23.7
A little to do with the negative aspects of the FSA	95	18.5
A moderate amount to do with the FSA	116	22.6
A lot to do with the FSA	181	35.2
Missing	12	—
Total	526	100.0

NOTE: FSA = Food Security Act; DC = district conservationist.

The response rate for the national sample was approximately 92%, and approximately 90%, 100%, 90%, and 85%, for the West, Midwest, South, and Northeast regions, respectively. These response rates are impressive and allow one to have confidence in what the results of the statistical analyses of the collected data suggest.

### **Dependent Variable**

This study is intended to explore the desire on the part of NRCS employees to transfer from their current positions to a non-DC job within the agency, because of the negative aspects of the FSA.

A two-step process was used to operationalize the dependent variable. First, DCs were asked to respond, in a yes or no format, whether they wanted to transfer to a non-DC job within the agency. Table 1 summarizes DC responses to this question.

More than half (50.5%) of the surveyed DCs expressed a desire to transfer to a non-DC job within the NRCS. However, it had yet to be determined whether this desire to transfer had anything to do with the negative aspects of the FSA. Therefore a second step in the analysis was in order.

The second step in this process involved selecting out for further analysis those DCs who expressed a desire to transfer to a non-DC job and then exploring the degree to which their desire to transfer had anything to do with the requirements of the FSA. Thus, the dependent variable in the analysis measures the extent to which the FSA influences DC desire to transfer to a non-DC job within the agency. Table 2 reveals the extent to which the FSA influenced the desire of the 526 DCs to transfer to a non-DC job within the NRCS.

Table 2 indicates that the FSA had a moderate to a lot to do with the desire to transfer to a non-DC job for approximately 58% of the DCs, whereas approximately 42% indicated the FSA had little or nothing to do with their desire to transfer.

**TABLE 3: Means, Standard Deviations, Sample Size, and Reliabilities of Variables Used to Predict Desire to Transfer<sup>a</sup>**

<i>Variable</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>Coefficient <math>\alpha</math></i>
Burnout (phase)	5.61	2.37	526	—
Job satisfaction				
General	3.13	.82	519	—
Staffing	1.98	.82	519	—
Leadership	4.62	1.98	522	.93
Attitudes and experiences				
Technical assistance	2.29	.80	513	—
Farmer relations	2.06	.70	485	—
FSA violations	1.60	.49	509	—
Willingness to transfer	2.44	.61	515	—

NOTE: FSA = Food Security Act.

a. See Appendix A for the exact wording of the variables.

### Independent Variables

Table 3 presents the means, standard deviations, and reliability estimates for the independent variables.

Research by Gabris and Ihrke (1996) and Ihrke (1996) indicated that DCs were experiencing relatively high levels of employee burnout. To measure this independent variable, the phase model developed by Golembiewski, Munzenrider, and Stevenson (1986) was employed. The model consists of eight phases, with each successive phase (one through eight) indicating increasing severity of burnout.

Two variables measuring DC job satisfaction were employed using a Likert-type format. The general job-satisfaction variable made use of a 5-point scale with responses ranging from 1 (*greatly dislike work*) to 5 (*greatly enjoy work*). The staffing variable was measured using a 4-point scale with responses ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The results, as shown in Table 3, indicate that, on average, DCs were modestly satisfied with their jobs and less than satisfied with current staffing levels.

This research makes use of an index of leader credibility developed by Gabris and Mitchell (1991). The seven variables that comprise the leadership-credibility index were derived from previous studies of administrative leadership in different types of public organizations. Approximately 500 employees in three separate federal agencies have completed versions of the instrument, along with more than 700 employees in several state and local government agencies. The index ranges from 1 to 10, with higher scores indicating more leader credibility, and has a reliability coefficient of .93.

The attitudes of DCs toward their work, along with their experiences at work, were measured using the 4-point scale, which ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). With regard to attitudes, Table 3 reveals that DCs are somewhat ambiguous as to whether the FSA helps to maintain the integrity of the NRCS mission. Table 3 also reveals information with regard to two DC experiences in implementing the FSA. The first variable measures the effect of the FSA on the relationship between DCs and producers. The second variable measures whether DCs had knowledge of producers who were out of compliance with FSA regulations at the time they filled out the questionnaire. This variable was measured using a yes or no format, with *yes* responses coded as 2, and *no* responses coded as 1.

Willingness to transfer was measured by a single question with response alternatives coded in the following order: 1 (*No, I am unwilling to move*); 2 (*Maybe, under some circum-*

**TABLE 4: Bivariate Correlations Among Predictors and Desire to Transfer Because of the Negative Aspects of the FSA**

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Burnout (phase)	—								
2. General job satisfaction	-.52***	—							
3. Satisfaction with staffing	-.24***	.28***	—						
4. Leadership credibility	-.25***	.36***	.23***	—					
5. Technical assistance	-.11**	.33***	.16***	.21***	—				
6. Farmer relations	-.26***	.37***	.20***	.26***	.33***	—			
7. FSA violations	.16**	-.14**	-.13**	-.14**	-.04	-.16***	—		
8. Willingness to transfer	-.03	.10*	.05	.00	.05	.06	-.00	—	
9. Desire to transfer	.46***	-.47***	-.33***	-.30***	-.33***	-.48***	-.26***	-.11*	—

NOTE: FSA = Food Security Act.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

stances; and 3 (Yes, I would be willing to move). Approximately 94% of the DCs responded either *maybe* or *yes* with regard to their willingness to move to another county or state while continuing to work for the NRCS.

What more can we learn about the likelihood of DC desire to transfer due to the negative aspects of FSA? The analysis section that follows will provide insight into the ways in which DC attitudes, beliefs, and experiences relate to desire to transfer to a non-DC job as a result of the negative aspects of the FSA.

## ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

What explains DC desire to transfer as outlined in the previous section? Table 4 presents the bivariate correlations for the predictor variables and for desire to transfer because of the negative aspects of the FSA. All of the hypothesized relationships between the predictor variables and desire to transfer were found to meet the modest statistical significance test of  $p < .05$ . These variables were then used in an ordinary least squares (OLS) regression analysis to predict desire-to-transfer behavior among DCs.

The results of the OLS regression predicting DC desire to transfer based on the negative aspects of the FSA are presented in Table 5.

The regression model accounts for approximately 43% of the variance in the dependent variable, which measures the extent to which DC desire to transfer to a non-DC job related to the negative aspects of the FSA. All of the predictors in the model exceeded the statistical significance test of  $p < .01$ , with the exceptions of the willingness-to-transfer and leadership-credibility variables. What does the model suggest about those DCs wishing to transfer field offices?

Burnout makes a difference in terms of DC desire to transfer field offices. Those DCs experiencing high levels of burnout tend to also feel that their desire to transfer to a non-DC job is associated with the negative aspects of FSA. Conversely, those DCs highly satisfied with their jobs tend to disassociate their desire to transfer to a non-DC job with the negative aspects of the FSA. Those DCs with high job-satisfaction levels must have alternative reasons for wishing to transfer field offices. Similar to the latter association, DCs who feel that they are adequately staffed tend to also indicate that their desire to transfer field offices has little to do with the negative aspects of the FSA.

**TABLE 5: Ordinary Least Squares Estimates for DC Desire to Transfer**

<i>Explanatory Variable</i>	b	SE
Burnout	.123***	.021
Job satisfaction	-.184**	.066
Leadership credibility	-.027	.024
FSA effect on farmer relations	-.447***	.068
Technical assistance	-.188**	.057
Adequate staffing	-.197***	.056
FSA violations <sup>a</sup>	.303***	.089
Willingness to transfer	-.118	.072
Constant	4.231***	
<i>F</i> test	42.165***	
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.441	
Adjusted <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.431	
<i>N</i>	434	

NOTE: DC = district conservationist; FSA = Food Service Act.

a. FSA violations is a dichotomous variable that measures whether DCs are aware of producers in their counties being in violation of FSA requirements within the last 12 months.

\**p* < .05. \*\**p* < .01. \*\*\**p* < .001.

A logical relationship was found in the transfer to a non-DC job model between FSA violations by producers and the desire to transfer field offices. In this case, those DCs aware of producer violations tend to associate their desire to transfer field offices with the negative aspects of FSA. If producers are found out of compliance with FSA regulations, then DCs have the authority to withhold USDA programmatic benefits from them. Withholding benefits is not an easy task and, therefore, some DCs may want to leave the situation rather than work through it.

The beliefs of DCs with regard to the substance of the FSA provisions also seem to influence DC desire to transfer to a non-DC job within the agency. The regression model reveals this aspect of DC attitudes and experiences in two ways. First, those DCs who believe that the FSA is merely an extension of the mission of the NRCS—that is, providing technical assistance to producers—tend to indicate that their desire to transfer has little to do with the negative aspects of FSA. Second, those DCs who feel that the FSA has strengthened DC-producer relations tend to also indicate that their desire to transfer has little to do with the negative aspects of FSA. In general, these two elements of the model reveal the importance of employees buying into the regulations they are to enforce, because they support the overall mission of the agency.

Michael Lipsky (1980) does not overstate the importance of employee buy in when he suggests, “One can expect a distinct degree of noncompliance if lower-level workers *interests* differ from the interests of those at higher levels, and the incentives and sanctions available to higher levels are not sufficient to prevail” (p. 17). What if the NRCS cannot accommodate all those DCs expressing a desire to transfer based on the negative aspects of the FSA? There is the real possibility that a significant number of DCs may opt for noncompliance in enforcing the provisions of the FSA as a means for reducing the conflictual nature of their new role brought about by external mission change.

The regression model does not reveal a significant association between DCs perceptions of leader credibility and their desires to transfer. This finding comes as somewhat of a surprise given what DCs indicated in field interviews and the questionnaire as to the importance

of leader credibility within NRCS. In particular, DCs indicated that credibility was most important at the state level, as compared to local- and national-level leadership.

Finally, contrary to what other studies have found (e.g., Brett & Reilly, 1988; Brett & Werbel, 1980; Gould & Penley, 1985), the regression model does not reveal a significant association between willingness to transfer and desire to transfer for this sample of DCs. DCs may feel that they would like to stay and work for the agency in a non-DC capacity while remaining in the same location.

## DISCUSSION

Change in agency mission and in role responsibility for employees can have a significant effect on employee behavior. In the case of the NRCS, mission change and DC role change are interconnected. The historic mission of the NRCS was to provide technical assistance on a voluntary basis to farmers and ranchers interested in implementing proactive practices on their land to maintain the resources. After the FSA, the NRCS retained technical assistance but also added a quasi-regulatory component to its mission. The burden of this mission change fell into the hands of the DCs, who saw their role change from that of technical advisor to that of regulator of farmer and rancher behavior.

These alterations in mission and in role responsibilities have not come without a price to the agency and its employees. This research illustrates the ways in which mission and role change can affect employee behavior. More than one half (50.5%) of the DCs expressed their desire to transfer to a non-DC job within the NRCS, and more than half (57.8%) of those expressed that their desire had something to do with the negative aspects of the FSA. This type of discovery would not be good news for any agency undergoing fundamental change.

This type of mission change—that is, the kind that fundamentally alters the relationship between producers and clients from one based on cooperation to one based on conflict—may very well be too much for DCs to endure. It is likely that the organization does not have the appropriate culture (or the necessary resources, for that matter) to support such a fundamental change and to keep people in their current positions. Therefore, it makes sense that so many DCs expressed a desire to transfer from their current field offices to a non-DC job within the agency because of the negative effects of the FSA. At the extreme, the NRCS may find noncompliance on the part of both producers and DCs in the likely event that not all transfers can be accommodated.

The attitudes, beliefs, and experiences of DCs also helped to explain DC desire to transfer. A number of important relationships were uncovered in this analysis. Burnout was once again shown to have a potentially negative effect on individual and organizational health. Employee attitudes toward NRCS policy were also shown to be associated with DC desire to transfer, as were DC experiences in implementing the FSA.

The relationships in this analysis receive support both intuitively as well as within the literature on employee transfer. It makes sense that those experiencing, for example, high levels of burnout or low job satisfaction, or that those who have knowledge of producers being out of compliance, or any combination of these experiences, would want to transfer to remove themselves from an unpleasant situation. Dalton and Mesch (1992) write, “Certainly, then, an employee might opt to transfer to ‘escape’ an unpleasant work situation” (p. 295). In the case of this research, a very high percent of the surveyed DCs indicated that their desire to transfer was based on the negative aspects of the FSA.

Willingness to transfer was found to be significantly correlated with DC desire to transfer in the bivariate analysis. However, this relationship was not sustained in the full regression model. Other factors were revealed to be more important in predicting this aspect of employee behavior.

The literature suggests the need to be cautious in interpreting the results of an analysis such as this on employee transfer, particularly with regard to causality (Dalton & Mesch, 1992). Previous studies (e.g., Brett, 1982; Grusky, 1967; Pruden, 1973; Viega, 1981) have reported that internal mobility may be a source of increased satisfaction and commitment. In this research, job satisfaction was used as a predictor of desire to transfer. However, given the nature of the dependent variable in question—that is, in measuring transfer desire due to the negative aspects of organizational change—it makes sense to use job satisfaction as a predictor variable. The very nature of what is measured by the dependent variable suggests that DCs are not satisfied with their jobs or the way those jobs have changed since the passage of the FSA.

Similarly, the variables measuring DC attitudes and experiences also make causal sense. DC attitudes toward the FSA logically predict a desire to transfer rather than to serve as consequences of this desire. Similarly, it does not seem logical that desire to transfer causes DCs to have knowledge of producers being out of compliance, much less cause bad relations with farmers.

The causal direction of the burnout-transfer relationship outlined in this study also makes sense. Burnout has been previously shown to be associated with various changes in work routines for DCs brought about by the FSA (Gabris & Ihrke, 1996). It therefore makes sense that DCs experiencing burnout are more likely to attribute their desire to transfer to the negative aspects of the FSA than are DCs who are not experiencing burnout. Thus, the fact that highly burned-out DCs expressed a desire to transfer based on negative experiences with the FSA makes causal sense. Furthermore, it is doubtful that desiring to transfer makes one more likely to burn out. Nor does it make sense to suggest that DC desire to transfer leads to more or less perceived leader credibility.

Given that so many DCs have expressed a desire to transfer within the NRCS, it is important for leaders of the agency to consider this information when making future staffing decisions. At a minimum, the agency will need to do something about the large number of DCs wanting to transfer. Obviously, the agency will not be able to accommodate all of these employees, but at least some will take advantage of transfers to satisfy their desires. The others may require training in regulatory enforcement, so as to make them more comfortable with their new role.

It is also important for the agency to make strategies for the future. If, in fact, the new mission and altered DC role are here to stay, then it seems logical for agency leaders to think about modifying the list of skills and the competencies required of new hires. The NRCS may want to work with colleges and universities to develop training in such areas as law enforcement for those degree programs (e.g., soil science, agronomy, etc.) that have traditionally produced DCs. Alternatively, or in conjunction with working with the universities, the agency may consider providing the training to new hires itself, so as to have some control over quality and consistency.

As time goes by and with the hiring of new employees appropriately socialized into the new regulatory role, the likelihood of such large numbers of DCs desiring job transfers should decrease significantly. That is, the regulatory aspects of the DC job, though still chal-

lenging, will become part of what is expected out of new hires, and those signing on will not have the same connection to the past way of doing things as those who have been with the NRCS throughout its change in mission. Thus, the level of dissatisfaction with the agency mission among employees as a whole should dissipate over time.

In the end, the NRCS will need to look toward the future and plan accordingly. Otherwise, it may face challenges such as a large turnover of its workforce and other potential problems.

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## APPENDIX A

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The questions from the survey used in this study are listed below, with the exception of those involving burnout, as they are available in a standard format referenced below. See text of article for survey coding.

### **Burnout**

**Burnout:** The Human Services Survey by Christina Maslach and Susan E. Jackson was used by permission of the Consulting Psychologists Press. The Human Services Survey is a 23-question survey, and the reader should consult this document to view the specific questions.

Responses to the 23 questions below were used in accordance with the Phase Model of Burnout developed by Golembiewski, Munzenrider, and Stevenson (1986).

Each respondent is given a phase score ranging from 1 to 8, with Phase 1 being the lowest level of burnout and Phase 8 being the highest level of burnout. See Golembiewski, Munzenrider, and Stevenson (1986) for a complete discussion of this process.

### **Job Satisfaction: Two Questions**

Job satisfaction: "Overall, how do you find your work as a DC this year?"

Adequate staffing: "Will the staff persons available to you the rest of this year be adequate (in numbers) for carrying out your field office's responsibilities (for FSA and other programs) in those months?"

### **Leadership**

**Leadership credibility:** The leadership index consists of the following seven variables and was modified from the original version by Gabris and Mitchell (1991).

1. The administration clearly communicates the purpose and the rationale behind new programs, activities, and responsibilities (such as those that came from FSA) in a way that wins employee acceptance.
2. The administration actively works to communicate the agency's vision and mission to employees.
3. DCs feel they can trust the administration.
4. When assigning projects and responsibilities, such as FSA implementation, the administration makes sure that DCs have sufficient power and authority to accomplish agency objectives.
5. The administration practices what it preaches in terms of management values, work effort, and reforms.
6. The administration follows through on its promises regarding changes and reforms it expects DCs to carry out.
7. The administration actively seeks to reward, praise, and recognize high performance.

### Attitudes and Experiences: 3 Questions

Technical assistance: "FSA is a new way of doing what SCS has always done—providing technical assistance to farmers."

FSA effect on farmer relations: "The effect of FSA on my relations with farmers has been positive."

FSA violations: "It is difficult to know everything that happens on farms in a county. In the past 12 months, have you been aware of any producers in your county who might be taking actions in violation of FSA (such as not actively applying a plan, sobusting, or swampbusting) that would jeopardize his or her eligibility for USDA benefits?"

### Willingness to Transfer

Willingness to transfer: "Would you be willing to move to another county or state to enhance your career with SCS?"

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## APPENDIX B

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### Data and Method

The survey of district conservationists (SDC) was conducted in the spring of 1994. The SDC consisted of a 240-question, 41-page booklet sent to a stratified random sample of district conservationists (DCs) working in Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) field offices in four administrative regions: Northeast, South, Midwest and West. Northern Illinois University, in cooperation with NRCS Illinois, cosponsored the survey. The survey contained questions on a number of topics, including several that are not discussed in this article (such as wetlands and pesticide management plans). The primary objective of the SDC was to examine the effects on DCs caused by the implementation of the Food Security Act (FSA). Included with the survey was an accompanying letter from then NRCS chief, Paul Johnson, encouraging participation in the survey because it "would significantly assist in making the decisions that face the agency in the near future" (SDC Survey, 1994, p. 1).

The sampling methodology (random) employed was done so that findings could be generalized to all district conservationists nationally, as well as within each particular administrative region. The error range used was plus or minus 5%. At the time of the survey, there were 2911 district conservationists (320 in the Northeast; 1,169 in the South; 1,008 in the Midwest; and 414 in the West). For a confidence interval of 95%, the sample per region was computed using the following formula:

$$n = C^2VN$$

$$E^2N + C^2V$$

Where

$n$  = sample size,

$C$  = the tabled Z or  $t$  value for the desired confidence level = 1.96,

$E$  = the desired error range,

$V$  = a measure of the expected variability =  $p(1-p)$ , and

$N$  = the population size.

Assumed maximum variability:  $p = .5$  and  $1-p = .5$

Using this formula, the sample size was:

Northeast: 174  
 South: 289  
 Midwest: 278  
 West: 199  
 Total: 940

A previous mailed survey by Dick Esseks and Steven Kraft (1994)—the principle researchers on the project—of the same population had an 88% return rate. Assuming a more conservative 78% return rate, the sample size was enlarged as follows:

Northeast: 221  
 South: 364  
 Midwest: 354  
 West: 252  
 Total: 1,191

To facilitate determining the impact of the change brought about by the FSA and to insure that the sample included a representative portion of offices with high, medium, and low workloads, the sample was stratified by workload. The data on the number of highly erodible tracts and on the number of positive wetland determinations was available for each county. To arrive at a proxy for FSA workload, the number of highly erodible tracts and the number of wetlands were added to get a figure for each county. Counties were not strictly contiguous with field offices; some field offices serve more than one county or less than one county. The research team had data on the field offices and the counties they served, and the members of the team then converted the workload data from counties to field offices. Then, for each region, field offices were arranged by workload, from lowest to highest, and breakpoints for high, medium, and low stratifications were determined. A computerized random selection program was then used to draw the necessary number from each stratum in each region.

The number of field offices sampled, attrition because of closures of field offices, and number of district conservationists responding to the survey are listed below.

<i>Categories</i>	<i>West</i>	<i>Midwest</i>	<i>South</i>	<i>Northeast</i>	<i>All Regions</i>
Original sample	252	354	364	221	1,191
Minus the offices that closed by the time of the survey	-3	-1	-4	-1	-9
Plus or minus the DCs who said they answered questions as if they still worked in their earlier 1994 region	0	5	-5	0	—
Final sample	249	358	355	220	1,182
Number of responses	223	357	319	186	1,085
Response rate (%)	89.6	99.7	89.9	84.5	91.8%

SOURCE: Esseks, Kraft, Sullivan, & M. Dellinger (1994).

NOTE: DCs = district conservationists

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