AREERA State Plans of Work

About Outcomes

This Plan of Work newsletter deals more in-depth with issues related to outcomes for the Planned Programs section of the new 2007-2011 State Plans of Work.

What is an outcome?

The Plan of Work (POW) guidelines defines outcomes as "an assessment of the results of a program activity compared to its intended purpose. The outcome indicator measures the success of the outcome. It is the evidence or information that represents the phenomenon that is being measured. They define the data that will be collected and evaluated."

Outcomes are the direct results or benefits for individuals, families, groups, communities, organizations, or systems. Examples include changes in knowledge, skill development, behavior, capacities or decision-making, and policy development. These include short-, medium-, and long-term outcomes in the theorized chain of causal events that will lead to the planned solution of the identified national problems or meet national needs. These are the public's return on its investment (the value added to society in the benefits it reaps from the program).

Outcomes can be short-, medium-, or longer-term achievements and may be positive, negative, neutral, intended, or unintended. Outcomes are central to the Planned Programs in the POW and subsequent Annual Report of Accomplishments.

Impact in this model refers to the ultimate consequence or effects of the program--for example, increased economic security, reduced rates of teen smoking, and improved air quality. In our model, impact is synonymous with the long-term outcome or your goal. It is at the farthest right on the logic model graphic. Impact refers to the ultimate, longer-term changes in social, economic, civic, or environmental conditions. Impact and long-term outcomes are often used interchangeably.

Enter in the POW your short-term (or changes in learning) measures, medium-term (or changes in action) measures, and long-term (or changes in condition) measures.

What standard outcome measures are in the POW?

There are no standard outcome measures for the FY 2007–2011 POW; States define all outcome measures. At the Outcomes Measures menu screen (see graphic below) you will choose to either "Add new Target Measure" or select to edit or delete already-entered State-generated target measures.
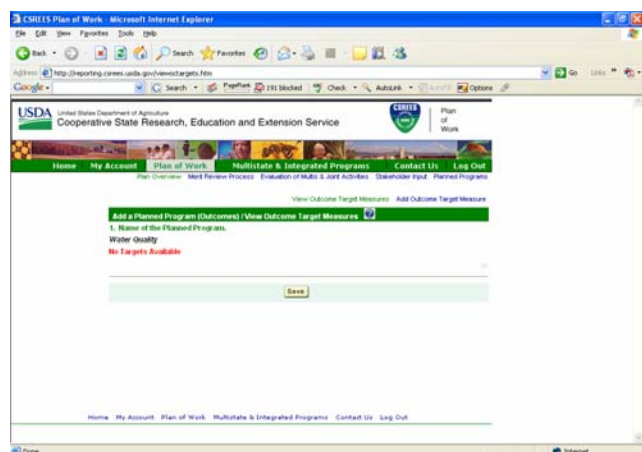
The software will then provide tables for your State-generated outcome indicators. See sample table below.
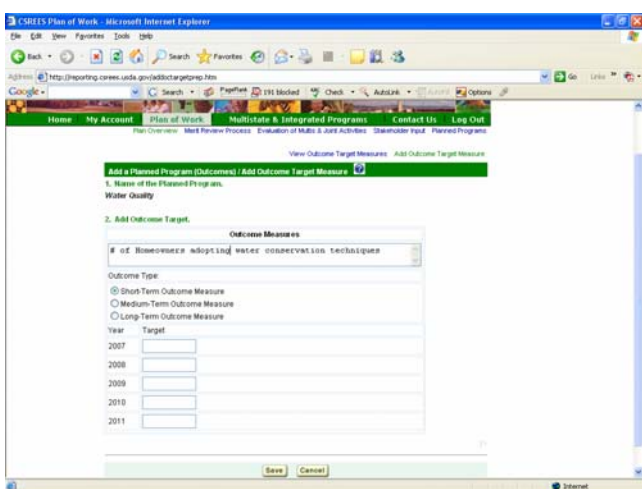
Enter into this table your State-generated outcome measures. Note that you will define each of your outcomes as short-, medium-, and long-term measures. Enter the outcome measure text into the table's header. Then enter your target measures in the table if appropriate.

For example, for short-term you may write "# or % of participants gaining knowledge" on a particular topic. For medium-term you may write, "# of persons adopting a practice" on something. For long-term you might write something like, "% decrease in contaminants".

Minimize the burden -- for mature programs, there is no need to enter numeric targets for the short- or medium-term outcomes if you have a well developed long-term outcome for which you do have a measure. We are ultimately looking for long-term measures. However, if you are only giving us a measure for the long-term outcome, enter the text for the short- and medium-term outcome measures to complete the planned program logic model.

For example, in a very mature water quality program you may already be measuring the long-term outcome of a decrease in contaminants in the water supply. If you are measuring such a long-term outcome already, all you would need to enter into the short- and medium-term outcomes are the text in the header of each of those tables. (i.e. "# of persons learning" for short term, and "# of persons making actual adjustments to cattle feed" for medium-term, without putting in target numbers for these).

Click "Save" to save your information when finished with each outcome table. Clicking "Cancel" will not save your information.

You can add as many State-generated outcome tables as you need.

What about the External Factors and Evaluation components on the last page of the Planned Programs Section?

The environment in which the program exists includes a variety of **external factors** that can influence the program's success. External factors include the cultural environment, climate, economic structure, housing patterns, demographic patterns, political environment, background and experiences of program participants, media influence, changing policies and priorities.

These external factors may have a major influence on the achievement of outcomes. We really can't ignore them in any good program plan, or in an evaluation plan. They are the alternative explanations for the results of the program. Thus, they must be controlled in any evaluation design that you may do. Strong causal conclusions about the efficacy of the program must eliminate these environmental factors as viable explanations for the observed outcomes.

External factors may affect a variety of things including:
- Program implementation
- Participants and recipients
- The speed and degree to which change occurs
- Available Staffing patterns and resources

These factors interact with the program. They not only influence the initiative, but are also influenced by the initiative. A program does not sit in isolation - somehow "outside" or "apart" from its surrounding environment. Thus, we want to know what external factors you foresee that may influence and serve as alternative explanations for your outcomes. Use the checkbox provided to tell us what external factors are relevant to this program. Use the "Other" check box with explanation if necessary. Also enter a very brief explanation in the text box (3,200 characters maximum) of these external factors if necessary.

Evaluation
Although not required, we encourage Planned Programs have evaluation studies planned at some key time in the life of the program. You all want to know if your program is successful. Evaluation undergirds the entire logic model and should be a part of your program plan. If you are planning evaluation studies, we want to know so we can follow-up on them.

We provided check boxes to describe the type of evaluation(s) and methods you expect to use to evaluate success in achieving outcomes. A text box is included here (3,200 characters maximum) for a brief explanation if necessary.

As part of an evaluation plan, please indicate which Data Collection Methods you are using to evaluate your programs. We provided another set of check boxes and a text box for you here.

Click "Save" when finished with this screen to save your information. Clicking "Cancel" will not save your information. When you click "Save," you will be taken back to the main Planned Program menu where you can add or edit another Planned Program for your POW.

NEWS FLASH!!

The Office of Extramural Programs (OEP) directed that the section of the POW dealing with the Multistate Extension and Integrated Research and Extension program activities financial accounting (Sections 105 and 204 of AREERA) will no longer be submitted with the POW on June 1, 2006. This does not affect any other section of the POW. All other sections are to be completed.

Ignore this section of the software in the POW. Data already entered in this section will not affect the program and we will not use it for the June 1 submission.

OEP will provide revised guidelines for this section later in June for submission of signed paper copies later this summer. CSREES will populate the software with this data for use in subsequent years.

Contact Bart Hewitt, 202-720-0747, or pow@csrees.usda.gov for more information on the Plan of Work.