

U.S. Department of Agriculture
Washington, D.C.

DEPARTMENTAL REGULATION		NUMBER: 1440-002
SUBJECT: Communications Coordination and Review Policy	DATE: February 7, 2003	
	OPI: Office of Communications	

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1 **PURPOSE**

This regulation prescribes the policies and procedures for production and dissemination of current information materials, principally news releases, backgrounders, media advisories, and similar information, and for working with news media representatives.

2 **SPECIAL INSTRUCTIONS/CANCELLATIONS**

This regulation supersedes DR-1440-002, "News Division."

3 **POLICY**

The policy of USDA is to use news media and other communications channels to report, explain, and interpret to the public, including specific interest groups, the policies, regulations, programs, and activities of USDA. The Secretary has delegated authority to the Office of Communications (OC) to determine policy and provide leadership and centralized operational direction for all USDA and agency information activities so that they will promote understanding about USDA policies, programs, and activities.

The Office of the Press Secretary is the OC unit through which current information is released in printed and electronic forms. Current information includes news releases, features, notices to correspondents, media advisories, testimony, speeches, and background pieces on current topics issued to all branches of the news media and other selected communications entities. The Communications Coordination and Review Center coordinates with the Press Secretary on these activities as well as others. These include recurrent as well as one-time Departmental-level publications, such as the Secretary's annual performance report, the annual Agriculture Fact Book, and special communications projects that disseminate information to general consumers as well as to targeted constituents.

4 RESPONSIBILITIES FOR CURRENT INFORMATION MATERIALS

- a Agency Duties. USDA agencies are responsible for developing information of national significance and making it available to OC's Communications Coordination and Review Center in acceptable formats. Each agency is responsible for accuracy of statements contained in news materials about agency activities, conformance to news style, and for clearance within the agency, including approvals as required by individual agency regulations. Each agency will indicate to the Communications Coordinator the name of the highest ranking agency official who cleared the news material(s). During the clearance process, news materials are to be marked "DRAFT" or otherwise clearly indicated as a draft document, and agency and OC employees are not to discuss with or show the contents to people who are not working directly with USDA.
- b Communications Coordinator Duties. It is the responsibility of the OC Communications Coordinator(s) to clear all news materials with the appropriate Under or Assistant Secretary, any other officials deemed necessary such as officials in the Secretary's Office, and the OC Director or Press Secretary. When the news materials have cleared USDA, the Communications Coordinator can clear them with other Federal agencies' and departments' communications offices, and with the press office in the White House, as necessary. If the Communications Coordinator substantively edits materials, the agency must be notified so the copy may be re-checked for accuracy prior to official release.
- c Issuance of National Releases. Following clearances, the Communications Coordinator directs release of the information to Washington correspondents and national media directly, electronically, or through other acceptable means. USDA agencies and their field offices are encouraged to redistribute national materials electronically or by other means to regional and local news media and other interested entities.

- d Issuance of Regional Releases by Agency Field Offices. Agency field offices should make a preliminary determination on whether news materials they are developing may have national significance and, if so, send a draft to the agency's national information director. That official may consult with the Communications Coordinator, and if they agree, the draft will be forwarded to the Communications Coordinator as a national release. Field offices are authorized to initiate and release information to news media within their geographic area only or to publications outside their geographic area which serve a specific trade group. Communications Coordinators serve as the authoritative reference for all clearance requirements for all press materials.
- e Issuance of Ongoing News Summaries to Top USDA Officials. Communications Coordination and Review keeps the Secretary of Agriculture and top USDA decision makers informed about the broad range of issues affecting USDA, especially those likely to be considered when formulating policy or procedures, or those likely to come up in interactions with the public and other Federal decision makers through a daily edition of the electronic news summary service, *AGNEWS*.

5 RESPONSIBILITIES FOR NEWS MEDIA SERVICE

The customer service policy of USDA is to cooperate with all media representatives when at all possible. This includes, but is not limited to, radio and television reporters, newspaper and magazine reporters, wire service reporters, newsletter editors, and the agricultural, consumer, and environmental media. Media calls must be given top priority since media representatives are often working on short deadlines. Failure to return calls to news media will be seen as poor customer service and may result in a negative image for all of USDA.

- a Agency Responsibilities. Each agency's national information director or staff office director is responsible for notifying the appropriate Communications Coordinator when the agency has been contacted by a national news media representative, or the agency is planning a "media event." Each agency's national information director is responsible for seeing that the proper agency official returns media calls as quickly as possible.
- b Communications Coordinator Responsibilities. The Communications Coordinator is responsible for coordinating all public communications within the respective USDA program mission area and within OC. This includes USDA-level media events, dissemination of current information, and responses to queries from national news media. Coordinators will:

- (1) Provide communications training for USDA officials, and help prepare USDA spokespersons to effectively communicate USDA messages to media and constituent groups.
 - (2) Work with others throughout USDA and in other Federal agencies to coordinate the involvement of agency public affairs directors, State program directors, and regional public affairs staff in communications planning where appropriate.
- c Handling "Crisis" Situations. Each agency's national information director is responsible for providing to the appropriate Communications Coordinator the name and home phone number of an agency "spokesperson" who may be contacted in the event of an agency "crisis." This spokesperson should be a knowledgeable program person who will be available to give interviews and talk to reporters during the "crisis."

6 LIMITATIONS

- a Promotion. Information materials will not be used to promote USDA or any of its agencies or individuals. Materials that would be considered as "puffery" or "self-aggrandizement" will not be produced or distributed by agency offices or OC. News materials will not be used to advance USDA, agency, or individual opinions on broad subjects without reference to a specific program.
- b Influencing Legislation. Information materials will not be issued by USDA for the purpose of directly influencing Congress to vote for or against any legislation or appropriation. Information which criticizes or aggrandizes elected or politically appointed officials, the Administration, or the Congress will not be issued as news materials by agency information offices or OC. This restriction includes statements that the public contact elected representatives to support or oppose pending legislation. (18 U.S.C. 1913)
- c Endorsements, Commercial References, and Use of Brand Names. Endorsements -- directly or indirectly -- of any commercial enterprise(s) or product(s) must be avoided whenever possible. However, in recognition that occasions may arise when mention of specific commercial enterprises or products is in the public interest or is difficult to avoid, these occasions must be justified and explained in documentation that is forwarded with the draft release for clearance and retained as part of the official file.

7 INFORMATION DISSEMINATION

The Office of Communications Coordination and Review has oversight for dissemination of information and news materials through computerized means and via electronic mailing lists nationally from Washington, D.C. Agencies may establish electronic, facsimile, and postal mailing lists to serve their particular needs, both in headquarters units and in field offices. However, each agency will notify the appropriate Communications Coordinator when establishing a new distribution system, and, if requested, will promptly provide an electronic copy of the distribution list and its intended use. All mailing lists/codes, both in Washington and in the field, must be circulated and revised at least annually.

8 POLICY AND STYLE GUIDES

The Office of Press Secretary will maintain a policy and style guide to be used by all USDA agencies and offices in preparing news materials. The guide will provide policy and style guidelines not covered by these regulations. Any news release style questions not covered in the USDA style book should follow the Associated Press style.

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