Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service
FOIA Backlog Reduction Plan
Fiscal Years 2009 and 2010

Background

In June of this year, the Department of Justice directed agencies that had not made progress in reducing their Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) backlogs to prepare Backlog Reduction Plans. APHIS was tasked with reviewing its FOIA operations and developing strategies that will eliminate the FOIA backlog.

APHIS reviewed several aspects of the FOIA program to determine our compliance with the statute's requirements. The review included interviews with APHIS FOIA management and senior FOIA analysts and a review of other agency improvement plans and websites. The following areas were assessed to determine whether opportunities exist for improvement:

1. The accessibility of public information posted on the APHIS website;
2. APHIS' administration of the FOIA, including abiding by statutory time limits;
3. Increasing FOIA training to APHIS program offices; and
4. Use of information technology to respond to FOIA requests.

We concluded that the APHIS FOIA program could be improved by increasing awareness and knowledge of FOIA requirements among APHIS program personnel and FOIA staff; improving the processing of FOIA requests and reducing the agency backlog; improving consistency and content in our E-FOIA Reading Room; and completing the implementation of FOIA automation software - FOIAXpress.

Fiscal Years 2009 and 2010

Backlog Reduction Strategies

Backlog Reduction: The priority for FY09 and FY 10 is to process the <u>oldest</u> cases while also ensuring that new cases do not enter the backlog. The goal will be to examine every option to aggressively close the oldest cases and to reduce the current pending backlog by a substantial percentage each fiscal year. The FOIA program will also continue to employ unique staffing strategies to help reduce the backlog.	

Area of Improvement	Goal	Improvement Steps
Backlog Reduction	In FY09 and FY10 close the 20 oldest pending FOIA requests.	In FY09 and FY10 identify 20 oldest pending requests. **(Completed by October 30, 2008 and October 30, 2009)** Verify that requesters are still interested in receiving responses to their requests. **(To be done quarterly starting October 2008)** Complete reports to the Department of Agriculture FOIA Officer to monitor progress and increase accountability. **(To be done monthly starting November 2008)** Complete processing and close out 20 oldest FOIA requests for FY09. **(Completed by September 30, 2009)** Complete processing and close out 20 oldest FOIA requests for FY10. **(Completed by September 30, 2010)**

Backlog Reduction	FY09 – Decrease the number of pending cases fiscal year 2008 and older by 20%. FY10 – Decrease the number of pending cases fiscal year 2009 and older by 40%.	Identify existing pending backlog. **(Completed by October 30, 2008 and October 30, 2009)** Verify that requesters are still interested in receiving responses to their FOIA requests. **(To be done quarterly starting October 2008)** Complete reports to the Department of Agriculture FOIA Officer to monitor progress and increase accountability. **(To be done monthly starting November 2008)** Reduce pending cases by 20%. **(Completed by September 30, 2009)** Reduce pending cases by 40%. **(Completed by September 30, 2010)**
Backlog Reduction	Strengthen staffing resources.	Fill 2 vacant specialist positions. **(December 2009)** Continue to implement agency Strike Teams. Strike Teams are comprised of APHIS program personnel who are temporarily assigned on detail to the FOIA Office to assist with FOIA review and processing. **(Implemented in July 2008)**

FOIA Training: APHIS will increase the delivery of FOIA training. To meet this need, we will implement an ongoing FOIA training program to ensure that APHIS employees are aware of the requirements and responsibilities under the FOIA. The objective will be to prioritize training to those staffs with the highest number of FOIA requests and to individuals who are required to search for responsive records.		
Area of Improvement	**Goal**	**Improvement Steps**
FOIA Training	Increase awareness of FOIA statutory requirements.	Issue annual APHIS webcast on FOIA requirements and agency responsibilities. **(Every 6 months starting April 2009 through September 2010)** Provide comprehensive training to individual APHIS program offices. **(Annually)** FOIA specialists must attend formal FOIA training. **(Annually)**

Electronic Freedom of Information Act (E-FOIA) Reading Room. APHIS has made improvements to the E-FOIA Reading Room and has implemented a new E-FOIA webpage to provide increased access to publicly available and frequently requested documents. The objective will be to conduct ongoing, periodic reviews of the webpage to ensure that the information is current.		
Area of Improvement	**Goal**	**Improvement Steps**
E-FOIA Reading Room	Improve access to APHIS E-FOIA Reading Room documents.	FOIA office and APHIS program offices will review the APHIS E-FOIA Reading Room. **(Quarterly starting October 2008)** Identify and post 1) policy, manuals and final opinion documents and 2) frequently requested documents to the APHIS E-FOIA Reading Room. **(Quarterly starting October 2008)**

FOIA Technology.   The APHIS FOIA program has made a significant investment in purchasing FOIA automation software – FOIAXpress. APHIS is currently ensuring that FOIAXpress meets the security accreditation requirements. Implementation of the software will be crucial in increasing the agency's responsiveness and meeting various reporting requirements.

Area of Improvement	Goal	Improvement Steps
FOIA Technology	Complete the installation of FOIAXpress software.	Complete the Certification and Accreditation process. (**Completed by February 2009**) Complete data migration of the FOIA Access database tracking system into FOIAXpress. (**Completed by April 2009**) Provide FOIAXpress training to the FOIA office. (**Completed by May 2009**)