ITS Connections

Volume 1, Issue #2

April 22, 2005

ITS Calendar

OCIO All Hands Video/ Teleconferences at 2pm, EST:

Monday	April 25
Tuesday	July 19
Tuesday	Oct. 18

Contact Information

Please share with us your story ideas, comments, calendar items, ingenious solutions, questions or answers. Email us at:

ITSConnections@usda.gov

ITS Leadership Team Holds Meeting

by Sheila W. Greene, Management and Program Analyst

The Information Technology Services' (ITS) Service Line Managers and Division Directors met in the George Washington Carver Center, Beltsville, Maryland, March 11-13, 2005 to discuss how they will work together. They collectively agreed on:

(1) The makeup of the service lines;

(2) The SLMs relative position with the Advisory Board;

(3) The needed level of signatures required on Service Level Agreements;

(4) Procedure for tracking service requests; and

(5) Protocols for interacting with the various staffs.

Left to right: Larry Brooks, Technical Support Division; Carol Henson, Infrastructure Operations Division; Scott Snover, Infrastructure Definition Division; Lisa Arcure, Administrative Management Division; Stan Gray, Infrastructure Governance Division.

Issues and concerns received from the Service Center Agencies' Chief Information Officers were also discussed and assignments with expected completion dates were established.

USDA Customer Satisfaction Questionnaire Goes On-Line:

Understanding Customer Satisfaction and What does it mean to ITS?

ITS's primary mission is to deliver information technology products and services that support the continuing business operations of RD, NRCS and FSA. To help ensure these services meet our SCA requirements, OCIO/ ITS is forming a strong partnership with our customers. A vital element of this relationship is communication about service expectations and satisfaction. One of our tools is the USDA Customer Satisfaction Questionnaire.

The Questionnaire will help us to develop an understanding of the quality and timeliness of IT services that RD, NRCS and FSA customers and end users believe they received prior to convergence. By indicating their level of satisfaction with the IT services that were provided by our former agencies, they

can assist in establishing a benchmark for future improvements at ITS. The questionnaire will also help identify areas of greatest concern that warrant our quick attention.

The USDA Customer Satisfaction Questionnaire is now on-line and available to all SCA employees. It is brief (10 questions) and anonymous. While answering the questionnaire, our customers are reminded to "focus on the services" because the Questionnaire is not about the infrastructure, the equipment, or applications they use. It is about their satisfaction with the timeliness and quality of the overall IT services they receive.

Results of the questionnaire will be distributed as soon as possible.

Plans To Resolve Grade Level Disparity

A recurring question that has emerged as a result of the convergence is: "What will be done to resolve the grade difference in the IT specialist positions (GS-2210) in the Technical Support Division?" Two activities will unfold over the coming months that will help resolve the grade disparity and provide an understandable and consistent approach to managing these positions.

The first involves the USDA Office of Human Capital Management (OHCM) which will be processing appeals filed by IT specialists regarding the proper classification of the duties officially assigned to their respective positions. The classification appeals process will consist of fact finding and a classification decision. Information will be obtained through correspondence, telephone calls, and questionnaires. The OHCM decision will be based on the work officially assigned to the position and the proper application of the OPM classification standards. OCHM has started the fact-finding process and anticipates a decision in the near future.

The second activity, supported directly by ITS management, is a study to determine the feasibility of establishing a career ladder for various positions, including the IT Specialists in the Technical Support Division. The study is intended to identify:

➢ Realistic distinctions between work assignments at each grade level;

➢ A target grade for the full performance level;

➢ A defined path from entry to full performance level for incumbents and applicants; and,

➢ Training/competency development standards.

According to the expected timetable, the study should begin in April with data collection and analysis; by the end of May, a career ladder model/prototype should be developed; and the model will be verified and validated in the field. A report of findings and recommendations will be issued in September.

While the study and the appeal process are separate exercises, both are aimed at ending the confusion and uncertainty experienced by employees and supervisors alike. Periodic updates will be issued on the status of these developments.

About the ITS Informational Graphic

We have been informed by Chris Lozos, Deputy Director for the USDA Visual Communications Center, that USDA would like to speak with one voice to its constituencies. Proliferation of logos can diminish this goal and weaken the Department's consistent identity. USDA reserves the use of logos for Agencies only.

Staffs within an agency may use their Agency logo (if one exists) in conjunction with the USDA logo as an identifier. ITS falls under the OCIO; therefore, ITS may use only the OCIO and USDA logos on any of its documents. The ITS informational graphic (right) is deemed "Theme Art" and should not be considered an ITS logo. It can be used to graphically support the ITS theme of people-process-performance in documents, but it is inappropriate to use it in other ways, such as on hats, shirts, or mugs unless the theme of the event where such items would be distributed relates to people, process, and performance.
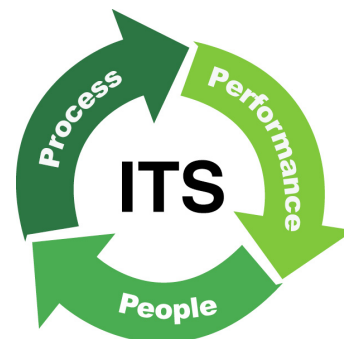
"...the beginning of a new – and faster paced – era for the Big Stone USDA Service Center in Ortonville, Minnesota..."

Big Stone County Service Center Gets Hi Speed Internet

By Krecia Leddy, District Conservationist

March 1, 2005 marked the *beginning of a new and faster paced era for the Big Stone USDA Service Center in Ortonville, Minnesota*. It was on that date that several challenges were finally overcome and the Service Center was upgraded from a dial-up computer connection to a cable high-speed computer line. Big Stone County is the final USDA Service Center in the nation to receive a high speed internet connection under the Service Center Modernization Initiative.

The delay in the upgrade was the result of numerous challenges. Initially the local phone company, Qwest, deemed it too expensive to bring a new T-1 line into Ortonville. When a neighboring phone company was also contacted, it was learned that the connection for a T-1 line – which is what most Service Centers use – would range upwards of $300,000. Thus, staff members from the Natural Resources Conservation Service's Information Technology Center (ITC) began to research the feasibility of a cable connection.

There were concerns of security and "static IP addresses," but eventually another USDA Service Center in the

Representatives from the Big Stone Service Center
Front Row Left to Right: Tammy Neubauer, District Clerk (SWCD), Krecia Leddy, District Conservationist (NRCS).
Back Row Left to Right: Deb Hansen, Soil Conservation Technician (NRCS), Gary Hoffman, Technician (SWCD – Soil and Water Conservation District), and Noelle Saeger, Work Available Employee (NRCS).

Southeast had cable installed in January. This helped make the cable installation a reality for the Big Stone Office.

Midcontinent Cable was contacted and discussions took place for the installation of cable at the Big Stone Service Center. The cable connection was installed in late February. The ITC located in Ft. Collins, CO, made the cable line fully operational on Tuesday, March 1st.

The Big Stone USDA Service Center reports that the upgrade has added efficiency to the office for staff and customers. Communication via e-mail and on-line reports, as well as entering progress data for the agency and processing on-line applications have greatly improved.

ITS Welcomes Justin Huff *From Rich Roberts, Acting ACIO*

I am pleased to announce that Justin Huff, a Schedule C employee, has been assigned to assist me with communicating with state leaders. As a Special Assistant to the Associate Chief Information Officer, Justin interfaces with state leaders on information technology experiences.

He is a graduate of Utah State University, is currently finishing requirements that will result in his being bestowed with a law degree from George Mason University this spring, and recently provided service to the 55th Presidential Inaugural Committee.

Justin, a native of Utah, is married, has one child, and resides in Falls Church, Virginia.

Welcome aboard, Justin Huff.

Justin Huff

GATEWAY REPLACES HARD DRIVES

By Robert Smith, Contracting Officer Technical Representative

As part of the Common Computing Environment (CCE) project, USDA purchased Gateway E-4100 mid range personal computer systems in fiscal year 2004 to replace systems that had been originally bought in fiscal year 1999.

Problems with an unusually large number of hard drive failures on the systems began to occur last fall. After consulting with Gateway engineers, it was determined that the cooling fan installed in the E-4100 mid range system was inadequate to cool the system and the hard drives were failing due to heat build-up inside the case.

Gateway began replacing the cooling fans in all the systems with new ones in late December 2004 and is approximately 70% complete. Only the Western states and the international sites remain to have the fans replaced. Unfortunately, however, the hard drives continue to fail even after replacement fans have been installed because the heat build-up inside the personal computer systems affected the drives and weakened them.

ITS personnel at the field level have been reporting the faulty hard drives to the centralized ITS Help Desk which, in turn, contacts the Gateway USDA Elite support help desk.

Gateway help desk personnel are replacing the hard drives within a couple of days; however, there is an issue with the time it takes to report a bad drive, get a new one sent to the site, and the time it takes the field ITS personnel to re-image the drive. The user is left without a computer for an unacceptable period of time.

To remedy the situation, Gateway has agreed to provide several spare hard drives to each of the ITS group managers so they can image the drives immediately when one fails before reporting the bad drive to the ITS Help Desk. Once notified, the Help Desk will contact the Gateway USDA Elite support help desk which, in turn, will send a replacement new drive to the group manager. The group manager will place the drive back into the pool of spare hard drives for use in another system.

Gateway continues to work cooperatively with us to address these problems. However, this does not reduce the workload, frustration, and loss of productivity we experience because of the drive failures. We are hoping that this situation will improve and that all of the weakened hard drives will soon be replaced. At that point, we expect the frequency of problems with the Gateway systems to diminish.

Magic Stats, *from the Service Desk*

This issue Magic Stats includes both the top categories of requests and how customers made the request.

TOP 10 SERVICE CALL CATEGORIES:
March 2005 –

Subject	Tickets Issued	Work Orders
Security	3465	350
COTS Software	2420	759
FSA Software	2285	593
HW – PCs	1430	1457
Network	1231	760
System Administration	1169	477
NRCS Software	972	422
HW – Printers	888	706
HW – Laptops	863	856
HW – General	844	1165
Total	**19,192**	**9,329**

CONTACT METHOD FOR SERVICE REQUESTS,
March 2005

REQUEST TYPE	TICKETS
Automated Alert	137
Call	12,620
Direct Contact	1,578
Email	2,264
FAX	51
Other	189
Self Service	1,487
Voice Mail	866