

DEPARTMENTAL REGULATION		NUMBER: 3430-001
SUBJECT: Web Site Development and Maintenance	DATE: May 19, 2004	
	OPI: Office of Communications	

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1 PURPOSE AND SCOPE

This regulation provides policies and guidelines for the design and publication of Department of Agriculture (USDA) organizational and personal Web pages. These Web pages, including Web-based application pages, are accessible by members of the public who have access to the Internet for telecommunications connectivity and use World Wide Web software browsers for search and retrieval services.

A Web site provides the public with an introduction to or “picture” of an organizational unit. The Web site may describe the unit’s mission and major programs; provide guidance on ways to access significant contacts or data and information; and offer hyperlinks to other organizational units, including subordinate units, and/or to organizations outside the unit.

This regulation is designed to ensure a standard, consistent, “look and feel” for all USDA Web sites and Web-based applications, while encouraging innovation in the current fast-moving software technology environment and minimizing constraints on ways in which agencies present material to the public. This document is intended to express basic policies and guidelines rather than to serve as a “how to” manual on Web page design.

2 SPECIAL INSTRUCTIONS/CANCELLATIONS

This regulation supersedes DR-3430-001, dated December 24, 2003.

3 BACKGROUND

Electronic information technologies such as the World Wide Web can be used to provide access to information that is well organized, easily found and retrieved, and offered at reasonable cost to information users and providers alike. These technologies provide a very effective way to communicate with members of the public who have access to the Internet through the use of personal or publicly available microcomputers.

An additional advantage of using the World Wide Web is that it offers multimedia capabilities, including sound (e.g., music and voice) and images (e.g., pictures, maps, and graphics) that can greatly increase the effectiveness of a Web page. The power and utility of the World Wide Web is related to its ability to provide hyperlinks to associated documents. Such hyperlinks allow the user to easily access other sites, other documents, and other sections of the same document. Typically, hyperlinks are activated simply by selecting or “clicking on” a portion of text or an image that has been rendered as a hyperlink. Linked text is referred to as hypertext.

To achieve the desired benefits of a successful public Internet-based information service and to avoid the frustrations of an unsuccessful one, the following considerations should be kept in mind in planning and designing such a service:

- a Web sites should be accessible to users with limited as well as full access capabilities. Web page designers should be aware that many users’ available microcomputer and telecommunications technologies may lack the speed and capacity of those available to the designers. Many users still access the Internet through a standard dial-up connection and have a narrow bandwidth communications capability. Some users, especially users dependent on screen reading software, will have text-only capabilities.
- b Information should be appropriate and presented in an organized manner. One major advantage of the World Wide Web is that it allows users to move easily from one linked site to another, thus accessing the Web sites of other organizations worldwide. If a linkage system is not properly designed, however, users can easily get “lost” and not recognize the significance or even the originator of the information they have accessed.

An organized design incorporating the totality of information available about USDA is critical to the presentation of an accurate picture of the Department. Typically, many people are involved in generating information from a variety of sources to post on Departmental and agency Web sites. These content providers, the designated Web site manager (also referred to as a “webmaster” or the assigned system administrator) must cooperatively act with these individuals to

ensure that the Web sites and associated documents present an accurate, descriptive, and representative image of the entire Department or agency and its work rather than an image that is fragmented, misleading, or incomplete.

- c The reality of worldwide access should be recognized. Web sites must be designed with the realization that the public documents they contain are accessible through an international network to users worldwide.
- d User anonymity must be maintained. Web servers referenced in this regulation provide open service to the public and must accept outside users without requiring either a local user account or a password.

4 POLICY

- a USDA fully supports the establishment of any open information server and service that (1) supports authorized mission-related activities of USDA, (2) is consistent with prudent operational and security considerations, (3) provides the public with easy electronic access to information about or disseminated by their Government, and (4) addresses the accessibility needs of individuals with disabilities as described in Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act.

Federal agencies and employees are encouraged to maintain open electronic communication with the public while recognizing that with this privilege comes the responsibility to use the electronic forum wisely in serving the public interest.

To facilitate communication between users and USDA, an e-mail contact shall be listed on the home page.

- b Only public information approved for public release through standard USDA review and clearance processes will be maintained on Web sites or made accessible through links to other Web pages. Unless an exception has been approved, links shall be made only to Government web pages. Exceptions must be approved in advance by the USDA Office of Communications.
- c Each home page must include a link to the "USDA Quality of Information Guidelines" as well as to agency-specific information on whom to contact to seek correction of USDA-disseminated information.
- d Security is a major consideration in the implementation of any open public access system. The planned approach to creation of a Web site must include attention to Web site security, including firewalls and other isolation techniques. Agency security officers must be consulted as to the technical operation of Web sites. (See additional security references in Section 5.)

- e Personal Web pages are permitted for individual employees in their official capacities if the information provided on the pages relates to and supports authorized USDA missions, such as descriptions of a USDA scientist's research, rather than serving to aggrandize any individual. USDA employees establishing personal Web pages on official Web sites that are accessible by the public must follow the guidelines outlined in this regulation.

- f USDA and agency/staff office home pages shall be linked with the USDA Privacy Policy statement. Any agency with unique privacy requirements, other than or in addition to those outlined in the USDA Privacy Policy statement, may establish and provide a hyperlink to its own privacy statement page. Agency privacy policy statements are subject to clearance requirements and must be linked with the USDA Privacy Policy statement.

- g Persistent cookies should not be used on USDA Web sites, or by contractors in designing and/or managing Web sites on behalf of USDA agencies, unless all the following conditions are met:
 - (1) A compelling need to gather the data on the site exists, and a cookie provides the best means of obtaining the data.
 - (2) Appropriate and publicly disclosed privacy safeguards are in place for the handling of information derived from the cookie.
 - (3) Clear, conspicuous notice is provided on the Web site that a cookie is being used.
 - (4) The Secretary of Agriculture has approved use of the cookie.

In addition, all USDA Web sites, including sites designed, operated, or managed by contractors on behalf of USDA agencies, shall comply with the standards set forth in the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act of 1998 with respect to the collection of personal information online at Web sites directed to children.

- h All information under consideration for publication in Web sites must be evaluated to determine whether the information constitutes Sensitive Security Information (SSI). SSI may not be made available except as described by USDA Departmental Regulation 3440-002, "Control and Protection of 'Sensitive Security Information.'"

- i All USDA Internet Web sites must comply with provisions stated in the USDA Web Style Guide. The Guide defines guidelines and standards for look, feel, and navigation to promote consistency while also improving the overall user experience. Guide provisions apply to Web-based application pages which can be viewed by external customers, and include any Web page or application that target all USDA employees, such as a USDA enterprise application.
- j Agency Intranet sites or other internal Web sites or Web applications, which are inaccessible to the public and used for internal nonpublic purposes, may not be required to use the guidance presented in the USDA Web Style Guide depending on the organization's mission

5 REFERENCES

- a Children's Online Privacy Protection Act of 1998.
- b Computer Security Act of 1987.
- c USDA Departmental Regulation 3140-1, "USDA Information Systems Security Policy."
- d USDA Departmental Regulation 3140-2, "USDA Internet Security Policy."
- e USDA Departmental Regulation 3300-1, "USDA Telecommunications and Internet Services and Use."
- f USDA Departmental Regulation 3040-001, "Electronic Records Management."
- g USDA Departmental Regulation 3440-002, "Control and Protection of 'Sensitive Security Information.'"
- h USDA Departmental Regulation 4030-001, "Section 508 Implementation Final Guidance."
- i Office of Management and Budget (OMB) Circular A-130 (revised) and OMB Circular A-130, Appendix III, "Security of Federal Automated Information."
- j The Privacy Act of 1974.
- k USDA Privacy Policy.
- l USDA Web Style Guide.

6 ABBREVIATIONS/DEFINITIONS

- a **Browser.** A shortened term for Web Browser. A browser is software used on the World Wide Web to access and/or retrieve documents through the use of Internet addresses known as “URLs.” Locating documents on the World Wide Web is facilitated through the use of hyperlinks in hypertext documents. Browsers may support only line mode, full-screen, or graphics including pictures and sound. Many browsers with various capabilities and platforms are available. Some browsers are proprietary and must be purchased, whereas others are available at no cost by downloading from a server. Examples of currently available browsers that should be supported include Internet Explorer, Netscape Navigator, Mozilla, Opera, and Safari.
- b **Dead link.** A link to a nonexistent or non-operational page or server.
- c **Firewall.** A dedicated device (hardware and software) placed between internal and external networks to control access and prevent misuse and abuse
- d **Home page.** Primary page or starting point, often reached through a uniform resource locator (URL).

Although a home page is described as a single document, it can contain multiple screens. An organizational home page contains information about a definable organization such as USDA, an agency, or a division of an agency. A personal Web page contains information related to an individual employee (e.g., a scientist whose work may be of interest to the public). See Section 4.e.

- e **HTML.** HyperText Markup Language.

HTML is the standard language used to produce Web pages and hyperlinks to other documents. Because this is a rapidly evolving technology, and because adherence to the international standards is voluntary, some variation exists in the versions of HTML available and the HTML features supported by various browsers. Agencies and offices need to be aware of these differences in electing a version to use. USDA will not adopt any single version of HTML.
- f **ISSPM.** Information Systems Security Program Manager.
- g **Public document.** Any document or information not subject to access limitations due to national security classification, the Privacy Act, Freedom of Information Act exemptions, or copyright protection.

- h Secondary pages. Additional pages, linked to a home page, or to another secondary page, containing additional information or resources.
- i SSI. Sensitive Security Information. Unclassified information of a sensitive nature, further defined in Departmental Regulation 3440-002, "Control and Protection of 'Sensitive Security Information.'"
- j URL. Uniform Resource Locator. A URL is the address of a resource such as a home page. The address syntax also defines the type of resource, as follows: scheme://host.domain[:port]/path/filename. The USDA home page URL, for example, is <http://www.usda.gov>
- k Web page. A document designed for access using a browser and developed in accordance with the HTML Web format standard. Typically, such documents are posted on an Internet or Intranet site.
- l World Wide Web (or WWW; also referred to as "the Web"). A hypertext-based client/server application that guides the user to a linked collection of information in a hypertext markup language available through the Internet and accessible through common browsing software.

7 GUIDELINES

- a Design approach
 - (1) USDA Internet Web sites must comply with the USDA Web Style Guide.
 - (2) A Web site or Web-based application shall be linked with metadata that describes information and data available to the public upon request.
 - (3) The Web site shall be structured around the mission of the organization and the information the organization wishes to convey to the public. The information and data an agency or office plans to present must be organized and its Web pages structured to provide the user with the efficient presentation and navigation of the organization's information. A "tree" structure can be useful for organizing information, though given the versatility of hypertext linkages, other modes of organization can also be effective.
 - (4) An organization's home page should be limited to a description of the organization's mission, functions, employees, and information resources. It would be inappropriate, for example, for a division's home page to describe the mission or functions of the entire agency.

- (5) Designers are encouraged to review the Web sites of other organizations on the Internet to become familiar with designs that are effective.
- (6) Agency program and public affairs staffs will develop each Web site jointly. The appropriate agency Information Systems Security Program Manager should be consulted regarding technical security issues prior to posting online.
- (7) Web pages shall be designed to support users (e.g., with limited access capabilities such as text-only browsers) who cannot or who do not wish to access pictures, graphics, or sound as well as to support users with full access capabilities.
- (8) A Web page under development should be reviewed and tested thoroughly—preferably by an independent tester using a wide variety of browsers—before release to the public. If particular versions of browsers are required to access the content, those limitations should be explicit on the page or on a technical page accessible through the Web page.

b Content

- (1) Web pages should be kept simple to avoid a cluttered or confusing appearance. As a general “rule of thumb,” a list or menu should be limited to ten or less items, and a maximum of 15.
- (2) Only USDA symbols approved by the Office of Communications or a duly authorized agency representative should be used. Agencies that are undergoing reorganization and do not have an appropriate logo should use the USDA symbol.
- (3) Secondary pages should contain navigational aids to assist the user in returning to previous pages or directly to the home page of the organization.
- (4) Links to governmental material outside USDA shall be identified clearly. (See Section 7. c. 2 & 3 for additional requirements regarding linking to nongovernmental or private sector Websites). Links to proprietary information or formats should be annotated appropriately. Links to large documents should inform about the file size of the document and warn of anticipated downloading time, if the time is lengthy.

- (5) Each Web page shall capture the most recent update of page information as part of the page metadata. Agencies and staff offices may display the date of the most recent update within the content area of the Web page.
- (6) Each Web site should invite users to submit comments or suggestions about page content via hyperlinks to user evaluation forms or by other means, such as an online e-mail form addressed to the Webmaster or to Contact Us.
- (7) The use of “dead” hyperlinks is not permitted. To refer to a document or document collection that is not yet available to the public, the phrase “under construction” or “not yet available” may be used on a page without a link to the page under development.
- (8) Home and secondary pages may be constructed using 800 x 600 pixel screen resolution with consideration of the navigational bars that each Web browser contains (i.e., top header icons, status bar, and right side scrollbars.) Pages that require printing should offer the ability to fully print the page using either the “Printer Friendly” technique or code that reformats a viewer’s page to the browser’s selected width.

c Management

- (1) Home and secondary pages should be updated routinely to ensure that they are current and accurate and that they address topics of greatest interest to users. A “What’s New” menu item linked to a page with a menu linked to new pages may be appropriate.
- (2) Hyperlinks to nongovernmental information should be used only if an official relationship, such as one involving a Memorandum of Agreement or Memorandum of Understanding, exists between the USDA program and the nongovernmental organization being linked.
- (3) A waiver issued by the Office of Communications is required for each link to a private sector Web site with which the agency does not have an official relationship. Agencies and offices requesting the link shall receive a reply in writing from the administrator or owner of the site to be linked granting acceptance of the link. The agency or office making the link is responsible for ensuring that the external link remains accurate. The Office of Communications shall establish a notice for use during linking to a private sector Web site informing the viewer that they are exiting the government page.

8 RESPONSIBILITIES

a Agencies will:

- (1) Establish agency policy as to the levels of allowable Web pages (i.e., from agency level to personal level), the content of a given document, and internal approval procedures in accordance with this Departmental Regulation.
- (2) Consult with the Office of Communications on the development of all Web pages, registering each home page and the name of the individual designated as the responsible point of contact (e.g., the agency Webmaster) with the Office of Communications Webmaster.
- (3) Ensure that the appropriate agency cyber-security office has approved the proposed installation approach for each agency home and secondary page. Agencies also will establish responsibility for the content and currency of each agency Web page and associated secondary pages, providing resources to maintain the quality and currency of the information. The assigned agency Webmaster routinely will verify the integrity of the material, including all hyperlinks, to ensure that the content has not been accidentally or maliciously altered or replaced.
- (4) Review and analyze usage reports and user comments, such as usability studies and customer satisfaction surveys, to improve agency understanding of outside parties and interests accessing agency information and make modifications if necessary based on this analysis.
- (5) Determine information sensitivity in accordance with the “Security Self-Assessment Guide for Information Technology Systems” published by the National Institute of Standards and Technology (Special Publication 800-26).

b The Office of Communications will:

- (1) Oversee the design and continued quality of USDA Web pages, and assist agencies in the appearance of the home page “look” and in identification of appropriate Web page content.

The USDA Press Secretary or the USDA Director of Web Services has the authority to block Internet access to Web pages that are non-compliant with this regulation or the USDA Web Style Guide.

- (2) Define the information structure for all Departmental and agency Web pages and associated links, and maintain a registry of all such home pages along with the names of individuals designated as responsible contacts.
- (3) Provide a list of approved agency home pages and URL's to the Information Systems Security Program Manager.

c The Office of the Chief Information Officer will:

- (1) Provide customer support to agencies and staff offices in relation to technical use of the USDA Internet Access Network.
- (2) Ensure that USDA Internet access is protected by a firewall.
- (3) Ensure that the Office of the Associate Chief Information Officer for Cyber Security (a) responds to requests for guidance on security issues relating to web pages and (b) reviews security documentation to ensure adequate agency verification of security controls.
- (4) Provide each agency with guidance in determining information sensitivity, as required.
- (5) Provide guidance regarding implementation and technical standards of Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act.
- (6) Approve domain names as authorized by Departmental Regulation 3300-1, USDA Telecommunications and Internet Services and Use. The Web site URL shall be as simple as possible and consistent with the stated naming conventions.

END