



United States  
Department of  
Agriculture

July 2005

# USDA's Results Agenda

## Implementing the President's Management Initiatives



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# INTRODUCTION: PARTNERING FOR RESULTS

The People's department (as Abraham Lincoln first called USDA) has always been driven to provide service to the American people—whether farmers, consumers, rural people, or those interested in nutrition, scientific research, our Nation's natural resources, food safety, or the protection and security of our food system. USDA employees achieve results every day, as they strive to provide the best government service.

The USDA Results Agenda and the President's Management Agenda serve as tools to build on USDA's long history of previous accomplishments. They enable the professional public servants at USDA to spend the taxpayers' money wisely and aid in our goal of improving programs every year.

## SCORECARD

Departments are held accountable for adopting the principles of each initiative. The Office of Management and Budget uses a simple grading system of red, yellow, and green to mark individual department results. Each quarter, departments across the government earn a score on their "status" in achieving the overall goals of each initiative and their "progress" in implementing their action plans. Green is for success; Yellow is for mixed results; and Red is for unsatisfactory.

The President's Management Agenda (PMA) launched in August 2001, is a strategy to improve the management and performance of the federal government in five areas: human capital, information technology, financial performance, budget and performance integration, and competitive sourcing. In addition, there are four program initiatives – Eliminating Improper Payments; Real Property Management; Research and Development Criteria; and Faith-based and Community Initiative.

Management initiatives work best when leaders partner with employees—tapping employees' energy and ideas and empowering them to be more effective in their jobs.

USDA employees are valuable partners in making USDA a better place. This report highlights key examples of progress made and measurable objectives achieved throughout the department.

USDA's SCORECARD AS OF JUNE 30, 2005		
<i>Initiative</i>	<i>Status</i>	<i>Progress</i>
Human Capital	Y	G
Competitive Sourcing	Y	G
Financial Performance	R	G
E-Government	Y	G
Budget/Perf. Integration	Y	G
Real Property	R	Y
R&D Investment Criteria	Y	G
Eliminating Improper Payments	Y	G
Faith-Based and Community Initiative	Y	G



## HUMAN CAPITAL

*In May of this year, 11,114 employees completed 1,166 courses. AgLearn currently offers 1,763 courses.*

### *Department Actions*

USDA is made up of a diverse, knowledgeable workforce of people with a broad spectrum of technical and program skills. People are USDA's greatest asset, its human capital. The Human Capital initiative is a critical and central component of the goal for employees to grow professionally every year.

The challenges of human capital are broad. USDA must continue to develop an organizational culture that promotes high performance standards, ensures accountability, and aligns employee performance with department and agency goals.

On the 2004 Federal Human Capital Survey, 81 percent of USDA employees responded favorably to the fact that they are held accountable for achieving results. This was slightly higher than the government-wide response. Also, 90 percent of USDA employees said that their work is important and that they feel good about the use of technology and employee cooperation.



USDA is proud of the following significant accomplishments in Human Capital during the past year:

- Increased the use of AgLearn to enhance the professional development of employees. In May of this year, 11,114 employees completed 1,166 courses. AgLearn currently offers 1,763 courses.
- Reduced skill gaps and under-representation in mission-critical occupations. USDA has gaps exceeding 3 percent in only 1 of its 19 mission-critical occupations. Mission-critical occupations represent almost 60 percent of USDA's workforce. This reduction in skill gaps reflects a strong commitment by managers and leaders to recruit and retain staff with critical skills and knowledge.
- Reduced hiring timelines from a governmentwide standard of 45 days to a department rate of 28 days, resulting in increased hires of talented and educated staff. This is another area where the human capital initiative is changing government to make it more competitive as "an employer of choice" and more results oriented. One agency saved \$250,000 by eliminating a manual test application and automated an online application system, thus considerably improving the hiring process and reducing hiring timelines.
- Increased the use of family-friendly policies as a hiring and retention tool. Telework, alternate work schedules, and transit subsidies—combined with other HR flexibilities such as student loan repayment plans, retention bonuses, relocation bonuses, and recruitment bonuses—help USDA recruit and retain "the best and the brightest."

These and other initiatives are helping USDA employees understand how they contribute to the strategic goals and mission of the department. USDA's investment in human capital creates an environment where everyone wins—clients, stakeholders, and especially its greatest asset, you, the employees.

### *Specific Agency Results*

#### **Office of Civil Rights**

Timely resolution of Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) concerns contributes to a more harmonious working environment and increases the confidence of employees and managers in the EEO process. The case inventory for fiscal year (FY) 2004 was 2,796 and

the Office of Civil Rights resolved 1,331 of these cases during the fiscal year. The effort allowed for a manageable case inventory—the number of cases that reasonably can be processed within regulatory time frames (180 days). The effort, combined with improved processing efficiency, reduced by 33.7 percent the average time to complete investigations of EEO complaints, bringing the department closer to its goal of completing EEO investigations within regulatory time frames.

As part of the Office of Civil Rights continuing effort to reduce the complaint inventory and resolve complaints in a timely manner, a Civil Rights Enterprise System is being implemented, which will be fully deployed by the fall of 2005. This system gives the agencies a Web-based solution to track, process, and manage employment and program complaints. This system will standardize and reduce costs of duplicative systems maintained throughout USDA, and it will improve efficiency by providing real-time access to agency complaint data. Once it is completed, system enhancements will allow for online filing and tracking of complaints.

#### **Office of the Chief Information Officer**

Information Technology projects require a highly skilled workforce. USDA's Information Technology Investment and Project Management training programs have produced more than 300 graduates. These graduates have the skills and competencies needed to ensure that all projects have strong business cases, meet organizational objectives, and conclude within established cost and schedule goals. In addition to training USDA employees, OCIO has trained staff from the departments of Treasury, Homeland Security, and Education, and the Environmental Protection Agency.

#### **Agricultural Marketing Service**

The Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) has used the Human Capital initiative to strategically improve management and performance of the agency and to develop and enhance the capabilities of its workforce and leaders.

To address needs and gaps identified in the agency's Human Capital Plan, the AMS Training Institute developed a Strategic Learning Plan that addresses the developmental needs of all 3,200 employees. The plan identifies and describes non-technical competencies for employees at the entry through executive level,

*All AMS employees can use [its Strategic Learning Plan] as a “hire through retire” way to develop themselves from the day they join the agency and throughout their entire careers.*

articulates performance indicators at the various levels, and suggests formal training and other strategies that employees can use to address the competencies. All AMS employees can use this plan as a “hire through retire” way to develop themselves from the day they join the agency and throughout their entire careers. In addition, this plan will serve as a resource to supervisors as they work with employees on their Individual Development Plans, now required for all employees. Prior to FY 2005, an estimated 15 percent of AMS employees used some planning tool to identify and plan for career development and non-technical training. With the introduction of the Strategic Learning Plan, 100 percent of AMS employees will have a tool to plan their AMS careers, and AMS will be in a better position to leverage resources.

While AMS has a number of activities to train its nonsupervisory and supervisory workforce, the Strategic Learning Plan helped the agency identify a need to enhance the skills of its executive workforce.

Seventy percent of Senior Executive Service employees are now eligible to retire, and almost 60 percent of GS-15 employees will be eligible within the next 2 years. During FY 2005, the AMS Training Institute introduced a program that addresses executive core qualifications and created new opportunities for all AMS employees at the GS-14 through SES level to develop their performance. This effort was introduced in late FY 2004, and has grown during FY 2005. The new executive development program, which is linked to the Human Capital initiative, has increased participation in executive development activities from approximately 13 percent in FY 2003 to 40 percent in FY 2005.

### **Food, Nutrition, and Consumer Services**

To ensure they had the right people in the right jobs, the Food and Nutrition Service and the Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion established teams to study over 200 administrative and information technology (IT) positions. The goal was to redeploy a minimum of 46 full-time equivalents (FTEs) to other assignments. Employees from all parts of the organization, including the affected functions, were involved in the restructuring effort. FNCS completed restructuring, with a total staff savings of 47 FTEs by the end of 2004, exceeding the initial goal and freeing up staff to meet other critical agency needs.

### **Food Safety and Inspection Service**

To increase the scientific and technical skills of the frontline workforce, FSIS is implementing a regional effort to ensure that all employees have access to new training opportunities. It is essential to train the workforce on policies to address emerging food safety issues. After just 1 year of implementing regional training, FSIS trained over 2,000 employees in the mission-critical occupations of Consumer Safety Inspector, Food Inspector, and Public Health Veterinarian. This year the agency is expanding the program by offering training to a larger number of employees and expanding the type of classes offered.



## BUDGET AND PERFORMANCE INTEGRATION

### *Department Actions*

USDA has a long history of achieving results. The Budget and Performance Integration (BPI) initiative is a tool for agencies to focus on the desired outcome of each of the department's more than 300 programs. The goal is to spend American taxpayers' money more effectively every year.

#### **PART**

The Program Assessment Rating Tool (PART) offers USDA a way to consider performance information when making management and funding decisions. The PART analyses have helped employees create better, more effective programs by keeping the focus on strategic objectives and measurable performance. USDA serves its customers through more than 300 hundred programs and, prior to PART, there was no standardized mechanism to evaluate them for effec-

tiveness. To date, USDA has completed 56 PART analyses and another 17 will be released with the President's FY 2007 budget.

With each PART analysis conducted, USDA agencies learn about program strengths and weaknesses. PART information is being used to help revise goals, objectives, and performance measures for strategic planning; to shape annual performance plans and budgets; and to improve program operations and procedures. Specific usage of PART evaluations include:

**Farm Services Agency (FSA).** As a result of the review of the direct loan and guaranteed loan programs, FSA began to develop meaningful outcome-oriented measures and goals. FSA participated with other USDA loan programs to develop a consistent efficiency measure. After an evaluation of its direct crop payments program, FSA developed new performance goals to improve the delivery of the program. Efficiency measures indicate that loan processing timeliness continues to improve. The average time to process a direct loan has decreased from 46 days in FY 2000 to 37 days in FY 2004. Likewise, guaranteed loan processing times continued their downward trend, with an average processing time in FY 2004 of 14 days, a 30 percent decline from FY 2000.





**Risk Management Agency (RMA).** RMA is establishing long-term and short-term measures and goals, and proposing improvements in the Crop Insurance Program that will make it more of a complete risk management tool. This includes a long-term measure of the value of risk protection provided to agricultural producers through FCIC-sponsored insurance. In Crop Year 2004, the value of risk production provided to agricultural producers increased about \$6 billion from Calendar Year 2003 levels, and exceeded the Calendar Year 2004 target by about \$4 billion. The agency has developed a new strategic plan, and its 2006 budget includes proposals to improve the program. These proposals include making the program more equitable in its treatment of large and small farms, reducing delivery costs, and ensuring that producers obtain an adequate level of protection.

#### **Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)**

As a result of the evaluations of NRCS programs, the agency determined that it needed to strengthen its performance measures for its programs, including Conservation Technical Assistance, Wildlife Habitat Incentives, National Resources Inventory, Plant Materials, and Farmland Protection and revise its strategic plan. The long-term measures will be included in the final revised strategic plan which is expected later this year. In addition, the PART evaluation of the Resource Conservation & Development (RC&D) Program helped to form the basis for an administration proposal that was included in the FY 2006 budget to eliminate federal financial support for RC&D areas more than 20 years old and to prioritize and focus the remaining resources on the newer RC&D's. This resulted in a savings of approximately \$25 million in the FY 2006 budget.

### *Specific Agency Results*

#### **Foreign Agricultural Service**

The McGovern-Dole International Food for Education and Child Nutrition Program provides for the donation of U.S. agricultural commodities and associated financial and technical assistance for preschool and school feeding programs in developing countries. The program is in its second year of operation.

In FY 2003, \$100 million was allocated to the program and on average 2.25 million meals per day were distributed. In FY 2004, the program's second year, \$50 million was allocated, and on average 2 mil-

lion meals per day were distributed to school children and mothers. The USDA focused on maximizing the number of beneficiaries under the program in FY 2004. In achieving this goal, USDA and its partners kept the overall level of beneficiaries close to the FY 2003 level by selecting more direct and efficient feeding programs.

Increased performance was made possible by a number of different actions. As an example, 28 of the 57 private, voluntary food-distribution organization applications were made using paperless Internet applications. This resulted in significant savings in USDA and organization staff hours as well as improved processing time.

#### **Forest Service**

The Forest Service is taking numerous steps to streamline and link business processes—planning, budgeting, monitoring, reporting, and evaluating—into an overall program of *Managing for Results*.

The Alaska Region, with its “Credibility Through Accountability” initiative, has taken the lead in exploring ways to do this. A year ago, the Region led the agency in developing standardized performance measures for some 70 program elements. This year, it created the first field-unit-based strategic business plan. This plan helps the agency link unit capabilities and needs to goals and objectives as identified in its strategic plan. The region also conducted the first data-quality assurance review of performance measures in response to a national directive. Lessons learned from these and other efforts are being transferred among field units via a series of peer exchanges.





### Program Initiative

#### *Department Actions*

The Research and Development Criteria program initiative calls on federal government agencies to apply a framework using three criteria—relevance, quality, and performance—to research.

USDA's research and development agencies—the Agricultural Research Service; Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service; Economic Research Service; and Forest Service Research and Development—have aggressively moved forward to integrate this framework.

The use of the criteria is an effective means to ensure that programs are addressing the right issues, meeting high quality standards, and accomplishing what they set out to do.

#### *Specific Agency Results*

##### **Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service**

The Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service (CSREES) conducts “portfolio” reviews on a 5-year cycle. Portfolios are a compilation of research topics that align with Strategic goals and objectives of the agency and department. Portfolio Review Expert Panels, comprised of external members, assess and rate investments. After the review adjustments can be made for higher priority and promising projects. For example, following a recommendation of one panel, the agency is developing new programs to address the needs of the organic industry. As the result of another panel recommendation, the agency is supporting a networking workshop for nutrition, food science, and plant breeding.

Those who have been through the process note that it enhanced their understanding of the department's strategic goals and how their work fits with that of other managers to achieve objectives. By the spring of 2005, CSREES had completed 11 portfolio reviews covering three of the five department strategic goals. By the spring of 2006, CSREES expects to assess programs under the two remaining goals, and thus to complete the first cycle of its portfolio reviews.

##### **Agricultural Research Service**

ARS conducts annual internal reviews of all research projects for relevancy, to inform management decisions that directly affect the allocation of resources within the base budget. To ensure quality, ARS continues peer reviews of project plans by independent external expert panels. Beginning in FY 2004, ARS tracks the performance of its 1,000+ individual research projects against the milestones established in each Project Plan. Annual reporting on the achievement of milestones has already begun to improve the agency's program and project management, helping managers and staff to track and report on performance.



## FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT

*USDA achieved a clean audit opinion for the first time in FY 2002 and sustained this critical performance benchmark in FY 2003—powerful evidence of the department’s improved accountability, internal control, and data integrity. And, instead of taking 5 months to issue the department financial statement, in 2004 USDA issued the statement in 45 days.*



### *Department Action*

Managers need accurate and timely information in order to make sound decisions. That is why sound financial management plays a pivotal role in delivering USDA programs. It is also important to USDA’s professional public servants, as well as to its customers, that they know how resources are spent and have confidence that programs and services are operating efficiently.

The department achieved another clean financial audit opinion for FY 2004, which means that the information reported in the financial statements was free of significant errors or misstatements. Most importantly, USDA can account for the dollars entrusted to it.

USDA achieved a clean audit opinion for the first time in FY 2002 and sustained this critical performance benchmark in FY 2003—powerful evidence of the department’s improved accountability, internal control, and data integrity. And, instead of taking 5 months to issue the department financial statement, in 2004 USDA issued the statement in 45 days.

The department is concentrating on removing all material deficiencies in its internal controls. Material deficiencies in internal controls make it difficult for management to ensure that its information is accurate for day-to-day operations and that its processes are running efficiently and appropriately. USDA made great progress in reducing its material internal control deficiencies. It started with 19 at the beginning of FY 2003 and cleared all but one existing deficiency by the end of FY 2004. This spring two new deficiencies were added. USDA’s goal is to eliminate all deficiencies by the end of calendar year 2005.

The department implemented electronic communication with some of its vendors, thus eliminating manual processing for invoices and payments while saving the equivalent of two full-time employee staff-years. It reduced the error rates in processing payments by as much as 50 percent, while processing 15 percent more documents, for a total of about 2.4 million documents annually. These improvements occurred without adding any additional staff.

To improve program delivery to customers and employees, USDA continues to improve its lending processes for farmers, housing, and rural development in terms of transaction approval, portfolio management, and debt collection. At the end of FY 2004, USDA had a total credit portfolio of about \$129 bil-

lion. It collected approximately \$1.1 billion of delinquent debt during FY 2004, plus an additional \$284 million of delinquent debt during the first quarter of FY 2005. USDA continues to be a leader in the federal government in referring 98 percent of eligible delinquent debt to the Department of Treasury for collection.

### *Specific Agency Results*

#### **Foreign Agricultural Service**

The Foreign Agricultural Service (FAS) manages nearly 100 offices overseas and more than \$60 million in reimbursable programs for international activities. In order to manage the agency's overseas offices and administer its reimbursable programs, FAS needed specialized functions to manage its financial data. To meet these needs, the agency developed the International Funds Control Reporting System (IFCRS). IFCRS is an online system that includes funds control, budgeting, and reporting capabilities for agency users overseas and in Washington, as well as for external users.

Data are generated at the embassy level by the Department of State. By giving managers access to more timely data, IFCRS has allowed FAS to monitor overseas operations more closely. This has been critical during recent months, as the value of the dollar, and therefore the cost of overseas operations, has fluctuated sharply. Managers in Washington operations now have access to near real-time data. This access allows them to monitor programs more closely.

#### **Office of the Chief Financial Officer**

The Office of the Chief Financial Officer's Controller Operations Division decreased costs by about \$1.5 million in the last 2 years, while increasing productivity. The time needed to identify cash reconciliation differences with Treasury on over 700 Treasury accounts, with 60 million annual transactions, has been reduced from 7 months to 2 months through the use of new automated tools. The number of items needing to be reconciled was reduced from 76,000 in September 2003 to 10,000 in September 2004.





*The Risk Management Agency (RMA) is making significant progress in preempting fraud, waste, and abuse through the use of data mining, remote sensing, and other advanced technologies. The agency has recognized cost savings in excess of \$320 million since employing data-mining systems beginning with the 2001 crop year.*

### Department Actions

Avoiding improper payments is one way USDA agencies can make sure that program dollars are spent as intended. USDA has made great progress in implementing the Improper Payments program initiative. In FY 2005, USDA identified where improper payments are being made and the causes. This information will be used to reduce and eliminate future improper payments at USDA. Accomplishments include:

- USDA assessed the risk of improper payments for its 250-plus programs.
- The department completed statistical samples of seven programs and used alternative testing on another. This testing quantified the number of improper payments made in each of these programs and identified their sources.
- USDA developed corrective action plans to reduce or eliminate improper payments for every high-risk program. Improvement targets were established for 8 of the 11 high-risk programs.
- The department implemented a recovery auditing pilot project to identify and recover improper payments related to contract disbursements.

### Specific Agency Results

#### **Risk Management Agency**

The Risk Management Agency (RMA) is making significant progress in preempting fraud, waste, and abuse through the use of data mining, remote sensing, and other advanced technologies. The agency has recognized cost savings in excess of \$320 million since employing data-mining systems beginning with the 2001 crop year.

Data mining is the process of extracting useful information from large amounts of data. With data mining and the use of spot checks, RMA identified farmers whose losses are inconsistent with those of their neighbors. These farmers are subject to a field inspection to verify crop losses.

Since implementing this program, crop insurance losses have dropped considerably over the last 4 years. This drop is evidence of the integrity of the Federal Crop Insurance program, which is important to RMA employees. Specific cost savings for crop years 2001,

2002, and 2003 total \$241 million. Crop year 2004 cost savings reported to date have totaled \$79 million. The return on investment using data mining has been significant. Since 2001, \$17 million has been spent on data mining efforts. That indicates a cost to benefit ratio of approximately 1:20. In other words, for every dollar spent on data mining efforts, the Federal Crop Insurance Program saves \$20 dollars.

#### **Food and Nutrition Service**

Food and Nutrition Service employees are continuing to build upon and refine activities for reducing payment errors to sustain the program's peak performance for the future.

The FY 2004 Food Stamp combined national error rate of 5.88 percent is the best rate achieved since the inception of the program. Program accuracy has

improved by 34 percent between FY 2000 and FY 2004, resulting in a decrease of erroneous payments of approximately \$700 million.

To encourage better program practices, the program provides \$24 million in bonuses annually to the 10 states with the lowest and most improved error rate. FNS is partnering with States to achieve this result by developing effective strategies to reduce payment errors. Together they are reviewing and monitoring State corrective-action plans and developing strategies for error reduction and corrective action.

FNS employees also have created a State Exchange Program. This program provides funds to states to obtain, observe, and share information on best practices and effective techniques for error reduction. They use a Partnerweb site that allows them to share information and best practices with state administering agencies to improve results.



#### *Department Action*

In addition to accounting for its financial assets, the department is working to ensure that it can account for its real property. USDA continues its concerted effort to improve its processes for managing real property holdings. Because the goal is to make sure that federal property is put to its best use, the Real Property Initiative is designed to focus management attention and increase accountability at all organizational levels. USDA owns approximately 190 million acres of land and nearly 22,000 buildings. Additionally, USDA agencies occupy 3,700 commercially leased locations and more than 1,300 space assignments provided by the General Services Administration (GSA). Through a collaborative effort, the department and its agencies are working to increase accountability and management of these assets through the departmental Asset Management Plan (AMP).

Expected results include better identification of unneeded properties for disposal and a more comprehensive inventory leading to more effective real property management. Through these efforts, USDA managers will be better equipped to address space considerations for meeting program requirements.

An important efficiency initiative contained in the FY 2006 Budget will enable the Forest Service to more effectively manage its facilities. The agency has over

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40,000 facilities in its inventory—significantly more than it needs and averaging substantially more than one building per employee. Legislation proposed as part of the budget will authorize the sale of unneeded facilities for fair market value, and the use of sale proceeds to address the maintenance backlog. In addition, the legislation will provide for the establishment of a working capital fund for facility maintenance that will assess programs that use facilities for the maintenance of those facilities. Local line officers will need to assess the number of facilities that are needed and the necessary operating funds to perform facilities maintenance; this creates the incentive to keep the number of facilities to a minimum. The rest will be conveyed at fair market value. It is anticipated this action will reduce the agency's deferred maintenance backlog by 25 percent by FY 2010.





## COMPETITIVE SOURCING

### *Department Actions*

USDA's competitive sourcing process enables the department and its agencies to be more effective and efficient with the taxpayers' money. For example, human resources and competitive sourcing organizations in USDA agencies have taken joint steps to identify skill imbalances, competency gaps, and organizational redundancies. The work in this area is expected to help agency managers to make decisions about workforce restructuring and using competitive sourcing.

During FY 2004, USDA continued to ensure that the studies it conducts reflect strategically grouped and related functions to fully realize the benefits of this initiative. For example, the department has issued internal guidance to ensure that feasibility analysis, including cost-benefit analysis, is performed before activities are scheduled for competition. The goal of the feasibility analysis is to ensure that functions selected for public-private sector competitions will result in lower costs and increased management efficiencies.

In FY 2004, USDA completed 16 competitive sourcing studies on 1,487 full-time equivalent positions. It also announced two competitive sourcing studies on 270 full-time equivalent positions. The estimated gross savings is \$179.2 million over 5 years. Equally important, agencies are provided the flexibility to re-allocate cost savings to other agency priorities or to deficit reduction.

### *Specific Agency Results*

#### **Agricultural Research Service**

ARS conducted two studies for its Facilities Operations and Maintenance and Research Farming support activities. These studies resulted in wins by the agency as the service provider with its Most Efficient Organization (MEO) bids. ARS estimates its savings at \$27,285,000 and \$3,599,000, respectively, for these studies over a 5-year period. The winning MEOs reflected the agency's responsiveness to the research environment in terms of both cost and performance. The agency created a transition plan to provide soft

landings for affected employees. This plan included training and assistance in resume preparation, employee counseling, Early Out (Voluntary Early Retirement Authority), Buy Out (Voluntary Separation Incentive Payment) authority, and placement assistance. These activities lessened the impact for downsized employees. They also increased efficiencies and savings for the taxpayers.

#### **Forest Service**

During FY 2004, the Forest Service conducted a service-wide competition involving 1,200 FTEs in its information technology services group. When the study of the IT function was first initiated, the Forest Service's IT operations were scattered throughout approximately 150 locations across the country. A careful evaluation of the agency's needs by its key stakeholders—IT, personnel, budget, legal, and program personnel—helped the agency realize that it could achieve significant savings without a diminution of service through consolidation and a more streamlined workforce. After performing a best value analysis of public and private sector proposals that took both cost and technical considerations into account, the Forest Service identified the government's most efficient organization (MEO) as the best alternative. By relying on ten computer servers and other restructured processes to effectively meet its IT needs, the Forest Service expects to save more than \$147 million over the next 5 years.



# EXPANDING EGOVERNMENT

*At long last, employees can move from one department to another and take their security clearance with them.*

## Departmental Actions

In the FY 2006 budget, the federal government would spend \$65 billion on Information Technology (IT)—of this USDA comprises \$1.9 billion. The eGovernment initiative ensures that these funds are used to expand the capacities of the department and its employees.

With regard to IT, USDA is focused on four themes: to expand the capabilities of employees; to ensure that financial investments in IT improve results of programs within the department; to identify areas where consolidations or common solutions can be achieved across the department; and to ensure that IT projects are delivered on time with their expected results.

During the FY 2005 budget process, the department did an extensive review of its IT investments. As a result, USDA reduced the number of IT projects from approximately 500 to 350. The consolidation effort focused on reducing redundant investments and has resulted in \$167 million in cost savings that agencies can now reallocate to serving their customers directly.

Additionally, USDA began to apply a process called Earned Value Management (EVM) to its major IT investments. EVM shows whether a project is progressing within the established budget and schedule. Results reported June 1, 2005, showed major investments were within 1 percent of budget and 4 percent of schedule.

## eClearance

At long last, employees can move from one department to another and take their security clearance with them. This marks a watershed of value for reducing costs and lost professional time while waiting months and sometimes years for redundant background checks and security clearances. USDA's partnership with the eClearance Presidential Initiative replaces a manual, paper-based security clearance process with an electronic-based system. USDA replaced its disparate agency-level and department security clearance processing systems with new governmentwide security clearance management tools.

**Statement Features**

- Customer Statement
- Print Statement
- Print USDA ID Card
- View My Land
- Download Map Data

**Contact Summary**

**Customer Name:** John Doe      **Statement Date:** 05/04/2004  
**USDA ID:** AAB-0001      **Email:** john.doe@zzzisp.com  
**Address:** 23 County Road A      **Telephone:** (434) 439-4959  
**City, State Zip:** Champaign, IL 30392  
**Source:** USDA Customer Database Database as of 2004-05-04

**Conservation Program Contract(s) Summary**

Program	Fiscal Year	Data Source	Application Amount	Contract Amount	Payments	Balance
Environmental Quality Incentive Program	2002	FSA		\$73,280	\$23,048	\$50,232
Environmental Quality Incentive Program	2003	NRCS		\$24,934	\$13,532	\$11,402

**Source:** FSA (as of 2004-05-04) FFIS as of 2004-05-04 NRCS (as of 2004-05-04)

**Benefits Summary**

Fiscal Year	Program	Total Amount
2004	DIRECT PAYMENT - CORN	\$915
2004	LIVESTOCK ASSISTANCE PROGRAM	\$869

*A customer can obtain an eGovernment account and password, view all of his or her NRCS contracts 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, regardless of contract location, and apply for practice payment on-line.*

### eRulemaking

Thanks to Regulations.gov, commenting online about federal rules and regulations is easier for the public. The eRulemaking Presidential Initiative transforms the current rulemaking process into an efficient and accessible process for the public and employees by allowing them to submit online comments for rules and regulations, along with other supporting documents, and it streamlines internal agency processes. Regulations.gov, a single governmentwide online service, allows the public to access and search all publicly available regulatory material and comment on proposed rules. The site now includes proposed rules from USDA agencies, allowing citizens to locate information much more easily from across USDA and other federal agencies.

## Specific Agency Results

### Farm Service Agency

The Farm Service Agency (FSA) completely automated the Conservation Reserve Program signup process in a Web environment, saving thousands of hours in staff time. Working closely with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), FSA was able to integrate data, minimizing manual intervention. This enabled the department to shorten the signup period and speed up the decision-making process for accepting bids, which resulted in better service to customers. For CRP signup, the decision-making process was reduced from nearly 2 months down to nearly 6 weeks, saving staff time and millions of taxpayer dollars.

### Natural Resources Conservation Service

Typically, NRCS employees meet with farmers and ranchers at their kitchen tables or in the office to review natural resource concerns or to discuss conservation program options. This one-on-one approach often takes between 8 and 60 hours to complete, depending on the size of the operation and the complexity of the situation. As the public's interest in

The image shows a screenshot of the USDA eGovernment Program website. The top navigation bar includes links for Home, About eGovernment, Newsroom, Resources, Help, and Contact Us. The main content area is titled 'Presidential Initiatives' and lists various initiatives applicable to USDA, such as Business Gateway, Disaster Management, E-Authentication, E-Clearance, Enterprise HR Integration, E-Payroll, E-Records Management, E-Rulemaking, E-Training, E-Travel, Federal Asset Sales, Geospatial One-Stop, GovBenefits.gov, Grants.gov, Integrated Acquisition Environment, International Trade Process Streamlining, E-Loans, Recreation One-Stop, Recruitment One-Stop, SAFECOM, USA Services, and Federal Health Architecture. To the right, there is a section for 'REGULATIONS.GOV' with a search bar and a 'Go' button. The REGULATIONS.GOV site is described as 'Your one stop site to comment on federal regulations' and includes a search bar for open regulations, a 'Go' button, and a 'FirstGov' logo.



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conservation activities continues to rise, NRCS was confronted with the need to streamline and improve its ability to deliver programs.

To address this situation, NRCS recently pioneered a new method of involving private landowners. In the summer of 2004 the agency developed a self-assessment for farmers and ranchers interested in participating in the new Conservation Security Program. The self-assessment—which is available online, on compact disk, or on paper—proved successful in giving farmers a straightforward guide through the first important steps of evaluating their resources and their management. Farmers and ranchers can determine for themselves whether they are eligible for the program, and whether management changes are needed to become even better conservationists. They are able to access this information at their convenience and are no longer tied to typical office hours.

Another way NRCS is increasing results for agriculture producers is the Program Contracts System (ProTracts). This is a Web-based application that eliminates paperwork and streamlines the program contracting process for the Environmental Quality Incentives Program, the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program, the Conservation Security Program, and the Agricultural Management Assistance Program. ProTracts has a built-in rules checker and internal payment calculator function that eliminate administrative contracting errors. This reduces the need for clients to travel to a local USDA Service Center in order to apply for programs and payments, obtain government forms, or review contract-related forms. A customer can obtain an eGovernment account and password, view all of his or her NRCS contracts 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, regardless of contract location, and apply for practice payment on-line.

A followup study of the effectiveness of ProTracts showed that developing a contract using ProTracts saved about 30 percent of the time it took to complete contracts manually. This is good for NRCS employees and agricultural producers.

### **Agricultural Marketing Service**

In May 2005, the Agricultural Marketing Service Market News Program—“the eyes and ears of American agriculture”—created and implemented a new Web portal to greatly enhance the delivery of critical market information to the public via the Internet. Fruit and vegetable market news information is the

first data accessible via the market news portal. Live-stock and grain information is being developed, and other commodities will follow.

The portal allows the public to customize an AMS Market News Website to meet their needs, provides users with direct access to the AMS Market News database of historical information, and allows users to choose their format for receiving data. Users can directly query the database of market information, tailoring their reports by commodity, date, variety, shipping point, or destination market.

Celebrating its 90th anniversary this year, the AMS Market News Program has moved from issuing its reports by telegraph in 1915, to access via the Internet today. Some 270,000 report titles are issued each year, reaching more than 300 million users in the United States and around the world. In 2004, the AMS Market News Website received over 22 million hits. With the addition of a true Web portal, the large array of AMS Market News users can now access information faster, easier, and in formats that more readily fit their needs.

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## FAITH-BASED AND COMMUNITY INITIATIVE: PROGRAM INITIATIVE

### *Department Actions*

For years, USDA has partnered with faith-based and community organizations to help deliver food and other vital assistance to those in need. USDA's Faith-Based and Community Initiatives (FBCI), a PMA program initiative, is working to strengthen these existing partnerships and create new ones to reach even more people in need. Faith-based and community groups represent a valuable asset in USDA's efforts to reach more people with its programs and be more successful in alleviating hunger and building stronger communities.

FBCI is strengthening USDA's partnerships with faith-based and community groups in a number of ways, including:

#### **Creating a level playing field**

A key principle of FBCI is that all groups—religious or secular, large or small—should compete on a level playing field when applying for federal assistance. Therefore, FBCI works to ensure that faith-based and community groups, especially those that have not partnered with the government before, have equal access to USDA programs. In July 2004, USDA published its final general rule, "Equal Opportunity for Religious Organizations," which outlines opportunities for faith-based organizations to apply for and compete on an equal footing with other eligible organizations that receive assistance from USDA.

#### **Engaging new groups in USDA programs**

FBCI conducts outreach activities to engage more faith-based and community groups in USDA programs. Working with newer and smaller groups is helping USDA reach people it has not reached before. One of these new partnerships is with the Starfinder Foundation, a community group in Philadelphia that provides a positive summer learning program for children. Last year, after hearing a number of complaints about stomachaches, the staff learned that many of the children had had nothing to eat for breakfast. Then Starfinder heard about USDA's summer feeding

*FBCI is empowering faith-based and community groups with information and technical assistance to deliver USDA programs to the individuals who need them most.*

programs through FBCI. Now, Starfinder is providing hundreds of hungry youngsters with healthful meals through the Summer Food Service Program.

#### **Empowering groups to advance USDA goals**

FBCI is empowering faith-based and community groups with information and technical assistance to deliver USDA programs to the individuals who need them most. Many individuals who qualify for and need USDA assistance do not know what services are available, how to access them, or where to receive them. Local faith-based and community groups are acting as a bridge between USDA and those in need through education and service delivery. These groups are helping low-income individuals apply for housing loans and rehabilitation grants, obtain food stamps, and receive many other benefits.



## *Specific Agency Results*

### **Farm Service Agency**

In FY 2003, USDA's Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC) owned 1.2 billion pounds of nonfat dry milk. The USDA feeding programs were not using the milk rapidly enough to remove the CCC-owned inventory. In response, the Farm Service Agency (FSA) developed the National Nonprofit Humanitarian Initiative to help feed hungry individuals in the United States who are experiencing unfortunate and difficult situations.

By March 2005, approximately 75 nonprofit organizations, many of which had never before received USDA commodities through FSA, were participating in this opportunity. These organizations were now able to service hundreds of local foodbanks, shelters, and other hunger relief organizations in almost every State.

For example, the First Baptist Church of Leesburg, FL, participated in the National Nonprofit Humanitarian Initiative. The church received and then re-distributed the milk to the social service center, which assists more than 4,000 people each year with food, clothing, and financial assistance. In addition, First Baptist distributed the milk to the Men's Shelter, the Women's Care Center, the Benevolence Center, the Community Medical Care Center, and the Saturday-Sunday School program for inner-city children.

In Chicago, Catholic Charities Emergency Assistance distributed much-needed milk to a number of sites throughout the metropolitan area—from the St. Vincent Center in Chicago to the Cardinal Bernardin Center in Waukegan. The milk helped nourish a great number of poor families with children, poor elderly, and disabled individuals. Typically, 100,000 individuals are served through Chicago's Catholic Charities Emergency Services annually.





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## Rural Development

Rural Development is working to identify and remove other barriers that prevent a level playing field for faith-based organizations. One of the best illustrations of this point is Rural Development's interaction with the Willcox United Methodist Preschool in Willcox, AZ. Last year, the preschool received \$350,000 in loan and grant money from USDA's Rural Development to build a new daycare facility. The new facility now offers high-quality daycare to 70 children up to 5 years old living in a traditionally underserved area. Assistance to this group would not have been possible prior to 2004 because of an eligibility barrier. Changes made to level the playing field allowed this and another community group to participate in this grant program.

The Mennonite Housing Rehabilitation Services in Wichita, KS, assists people who cannot afford home repair, decent housing or home ownership in any other way. Last year, this faith-based group received almost \$300,000 in grant funds that allowed for the construction of 18 homes for low-income and very-low-income families. In addition, the group provided guidance to families on construction, maintenance, and credit issues to encourage successful first-time homeownership, and enable these families to attain better creditworthiness.

## LOOKING FORWARD

USDA continues to build on the department's long history of accomplishments. The goal is to increase the tools available to employees to do their jobs more effectively as they serve the public and accomplish their program aims.

In September 2005, USDA will issue an updated departmental Strategic Plan, which will provide the goals and objectives the department will work to achieve for the next 5 years. Also, the department will be focusing even greater attention on accountability, to ensure that it produces the intended results.

In the next year, the *Human Capital initiative* will continue to focus on succession planning, recruitment, and retention, reduction of skill gaps, continuation of strategically linked performance appraisals, and professional development programs.

As the department and its agencies develop the FY 2007 budget, the *Budget and Performance Integration initiative* will concentrate on actions to address PART findings and to improve program efficiencies. Efficiency measures will be developed and improved and performance measures will be reviewed with senior level managers.

For the *Financial Management initiative*, the department will continue to provide timely and accurate information to managers, strive to maintain a clean audit, and partner with the Department of Treasury to reduce delinquent debt. Also, USDA will implement a corrective action plan, developed in FY 2005, to reduce and recover improper payments.

In FY 2005, USDA will conduct feasibility studies for potential public-private competitions covering over 1,000 FTEs. Based on those, and private sector market research, full *Competitive Sourcing* studies could be conducted

Implementation of the *Expanding eGovernment initiative* will further improve on employee capabilities and provide greater tools to achieve USDA's goals. In the next year, the initiative will continue to focus IT investments on common solutions and consolidation across the department and governmentwide. Also, it will continue to ensure that IT projects are delivered on time and with their expected results.

As the *Faith-Based and Community Initiative* (FBCI) looks to the next year of its work, it will continue to engage and empower new groups as partners while identifying additional ways that these groups can help USDA advance its FBCI goals of: ensuring success by measuring results, identifying new ways to support USDA goals, and expanding on current efforts to ensure a level playing field.



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