



OCIO – Information Technology Services ITS Connections 9

Volume 2, Issue 4

November 10, 2006



Contents

World View, Mission Focus: Delivering ArcGIS	1
UTN: The Pipeline's Progress	2
ADMIN News:	2
Open Season	2
Flexible Spending Account	3
Welcome Nancy Palmer	4
OPM Revises Leave Regulations	4
Government Travel and Tax Exemption	5
EAP	5
Magic Stats	6

World View, Mission Focus: ITS DELIVERS THE SCA ARCGIS ENTERPRISE

This is a 3 part series. Part 1 focuses on the ArcGIS Implementation Overview; Part 2 will show how the agencies use ArcGIS; and Part 3 explores the teamwork between ITS, FSA, NRCS, and RD that built the system.

As service center modernization was getting underway in the late 1990's, the IT Working Group (ITWG) with members from FSA, NRCS, RD, and OCIO, formed a special team to prepare a strategic vision for investing in a Geographic Information System (GIS). The team documented what each agency needed from a GIS and, after rigorous evaluation, selected ESRI ArcGIS. Their vision included both quick deployment of local GIS capabilities for Service Center offices and a long term plan for an enterprise system that required the technical advances in computing, networking, and high speed telecommunications we now have.

The plan clearly showed that coordinated planning and sharing of IT resources made it possible to achieve together what they could never afford to build separately. The team also calculated the savings and customer service benefits GIS would provide to offset the cost of building the solution, which was a vital business concern for USDA management. This vision is now reality and in the year ahead ITS and the agencies expect to finish the ArcGIS Enterprise project that ITWG began in 1998.

FROM COMPASS AND PEN TO SATELLITE AND WORKSTATION

Tools and technology are meaningful by what people accomplish with them. Since the 1930's maps and mapmaking have been fundamental tools and skills for USDA programs that analyze land use, estimate agricultural production, advise on resource conservation, determine program eligibility and compliance, assess and plan disaster relief, provide access to rural utilities, or consider locations for housing and economic investment.

Virtually everything done by FSA, NRCS, and RD relies on good maps. Traditional map production was paper-based, labor intensive and time consuming. Keeping them updated, accessible, and useful for customers was difficult.

The current system replaces those paper-based charts with their hand-drawn annotations with up-to-date digital imagery linked to national database networks and program specific tools that let agency employees produce and update the maps they and their customers require.



The paper map above was updated by writing on the surface, or on overlays taped to it, and then it was stored locally in drawers with hundreds of other maps. (Image courtesy Ted Payne, FSA)

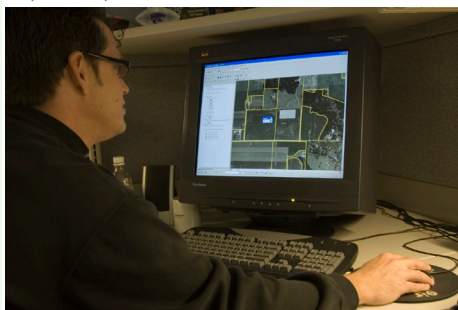


Photo: Ted Payne, Chief, FSA/ITSD/GIEMSC/GIS Office, updates an ArcGIS map supplied by FSA's National Aerial Imagery Program. Maps and data are stored in FSA's central Aerial Photography Field Office Data Warehouse, making them accessible to any Service Center Agency employee.

The ArcGIS project highlights the value added by ITS and the shared environment –

- FSA, NRCS, and RD determine their needs.
- ITS works with them to define IT solutions for their business requirements. ITS then tests, acquires, deploys, and manages the technology so the agencies can focus on delivering their services.
- And the shared ITS environment provides the network, security, support, and interoperability allow ArcGIS to function and be accessible for all Service Center Agency users and their customers.

Contact us at:
<mailto:ITS-Connections@wdc.usda.gov>

Next Issue: How GIS works.

UTN: THE PIPELINE'S PROGRESS

The Universal Telecommunications Network (UTN) is the replacement system for the old SCA VPN. It will provide overall improved bandwidth, throughput, and capacity. AT&T, the vendor for UTN, is also supporting the ITS network transition to IPv6, an OMB requirement throughout the government which will improve security and scalability.

Testing and monitoring were successfully conducted on the new circuits prior to full deployment, which began in October. John Gambriel, Project Management Branch-Infrastructure Governance Division, reports that "as of November 7, we have migrated 261 sites to the UTN."

Design and architecture were provided by Tom Rudnick and his team at the Architecture Definition Branch-IDD; implementation execution is provided by Judy Rhoades' team at Telecom Operations Branch-IOD; and direct customer support and logistics is provided by teams throughout the Technical Support Division and coordinated by Gary Mareschal.

After years of preparation, UTN is going forward with an ambitious schedule. John says, "We are scheduling from 15 to 25 sites per day, excluding dates blacked out at agency request, until deployment is complete with an end date around August 31, 2007."

Admin News:

'Tis the Open Season' - NOVEMBER 13 - DECEMBER 11, 2006

November 13 - December 11, 2006, is our open season for:

- Federal Employees Health Benefits (FEHB) Program
- Federal Employees Dental and Vision Insurance Program (FEDVIP), and
- Flexible Spending Accounts Program (FSAFEDS).

A lot of information is or very soon will be available

One excellent source of information for all the programs mentioned in this article is the Bureau of Public Debt (BPD) Administrative Resource Center's ITS Notice site:

<http://arc.publicdebt.treas.gov/DWP/fs/fsagociohnotref.htm>

There is also information specific to each program.

FEHB - A guide to FEHB will be mailed to each employee's home address and you'll get more information via email. You can also go to the U.S. Office of Personnel Management FEHB site:

<http://www.opm.gov/insure/health/index.asp>

FEDVIP - All employees were sent information on October 30. This program's home page is:

<http://www.opm.gov/insure/DentalVision/index.asp>

FSAFEDS - See the article on the next page. Also, the FSAFEDS brochure was sent to ITS employees on October 30 and you can go to the program's website at:

<http://www.fsafeds.com>

Two benefits programs are open throughout the year

Two benefit programs open all year are:

- Federal Long Term Care Insurance Programs (FLTCIP). Its website is:

<http://www.opm.gov/insure/ltc/index.asp>

- Thrift Savings Plan (TSP). All employees received an October 30 notice about TSP. Its website is:

<http://www.tsp.gov>

BPD's benefits staff at your service

Finally, BPD's benefits staff is available for assistance. Contact Sherry Curtis at 304-480-8212 or email her at:

<mailto:sherry.curtis@bpd.treas.gov>

Admin News continues on next page.

A Flexible Spending Account (FSA) - A VALUABLE BENEFIT FOR HEALTH AND DEPENDENT CARE

FSA 101 - UNDERSTANDING THE BASICS

Have you always intended to look into a Flexible Savings Account (FSA) and wondered about its benefits?

Many Government employees don't participate in or fully understand the FSA and the savings they can enjoy from it. Since FSA's open season runs concurrently with FEHB open season, *November 13 – December 11*, now is a good time to share some information so that you can decide if the FSA benefit is a good option for you. For those of you who already enjoy the benefits of your FSA, don't forget that you need to re-enroll each year; you can do so by clicking into the website provided below.

Using PRE-TAX DOLLARS FOR HEALTH EXPENSES CAN SAVE YOU 20-40%

Because the FSA is a pre-tax deduction, you can enjoy a discount of 20-40% on out-of-pocket health care and dependent care expenses. Because the account is made up of pre-tax dollars, the expenses paid for with your FSA are essentially discounted in an amount equal to your tax savings. Also, an FSA account can be a great cash management tool. When you have child care or health care out-of-pocket expenses such as co-pays, deductibles, dental or vision services, and appropriate over-the-counter medications, you know you will have the money on hand to cover the expenses when you need it. Reimbursement can take as little as 3 days, especially if you sign up for automatic reimbursement paid directly into your checking account.

ARRANGING AN "ADVANCE" FOR YOUR MEDICAL EXPENSES

Most employees aren't aware that you can use your full amount of annual deductions as soon as the first deduction is made in the new calendar year.

For instance, if you have a medical procedure you have been postponing for financial reasons, you can arrange to draw an "advance" on what will be in your account. The way this works is you can have your FSA deduct the amount you need over 26 pay periods of the new calendar year, but draw that full amount in January to have your procedure done.

SOME RECENT CHANGES

There have been a few recent changes to FSAs. There is now a 2 ½-month grace period for incurring eligible expenses. This allows you to claim expenses actually incurred in the year following enrollment up to March 15. Also, the deadline for filing for reimbursement has been extended until May 31 of the year following enrollment, and the increased annual FSA maximum is now \$5000. Many employees may have avoided FSAs in the past because of the "Use-It-or-Lose-It" rule. However, with the new grace period and May 31 deadline for claims, those concerns may be alleviated.

LEARN MORE AT FSAFEDS' INTERACTIVE WEBSITE

To learn more about FSAFEDS and, if you are ready, enroll during the open season, just go to:

<http://www.fsafeds.com>

You will find an interactive calculator on the website to help you figure how much to contribute to the plan as well as detailed information regarding what items are covered. The website has information that will answer nearly any question you might have about FSAs. If you can't find an answer to your question on the website, you can call 1-877-372-3337 or TTY: 1-800-952-0450. Sherry Curtis at the Bureau of Public Debt is also available to answer your questions at 304-480-8212 or:

<mailto:sherry.curtis@bpd.treas.gov>



NANCY PALMER JOINS THE EMPLOYEE SERVICES BRANCH

Nancy Palmer has joined the ITS Administrative Services Division as a Human Resources (HR) Specialist in the Employee Services Branch. She comes from USDA Rural Development (RD), where she was employed for 22 years.

Nancy began her Government career with the Department of the Army and worked at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, and Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri. After moving to St. Louis, Nancy was employed by the United States Postal Service for almost 5 years. In 1984, she transferred to what was then known as Farmers Home Administration, a predecessor to RD, and worked as a supervisor and manager for 12 years before making a career change to become an HR Specialist.

Nancy has been an HR Specialist in RD-St. Louis for the past 10 years; for the majority of her time in HR she has worked in employee and labor relations, but her experience also includes staffing and classification.

Nancy can be reached at (314) 335-8153 or by email:
<mailto:Nancy.Palmer@stl.usda.gov>.



Photo: Nancy Palmer

OPM REVISES LEAVE REGULATIONS

EFFECTIVE SEPTEMBER 18, 2006-

OPM has improved Federal employees' sick leave benefits and continued the move toward standardizing leave rules across Federal agencies by:

- **Abolishing the requirement for full-time Federal employees to maintain a minimum of 80 hours of sick leave** in their accounts in order to use the maximum amount of sick leave for family care and bereavement purposes per leave year. This generally is referred to as "family friendly leave."

Before this change, as a full-time Federal employee, you had to keep an 80-hour sick leave balance to be entitled to use up to 104 hours of sick leave for general family care or bereavement purposes and up to 480 hours of sick leave to care for a family member with a serious health condition. Without this balance, the amount of sick leave you could take for such purposes was more limited.

While OPM abolished the 80-hour minimum, it did not change the limit of 480 hours that can be used for the combined family friendly leave benefits per leave year (these limits are prorated for part-time employees).

For example, if you have already used 104 hours of sick leave for general family care and bereavement purposes, you only have 376 hours (480 hours -104 hours) left to use to care for a family member with a serious health condition.

- **Clarifying that an employee may be advanced a maximum of 30 days (240 hours) of sick leave** "when required by the exigencies of the situation" for a serious disability or ailment of the employee or a family member, or for purposes related to the adoption of a child. This is not a new leave benefit, but OPM felt it needed to be clarified in their regulations.
- **Establishing a Government-wide policy on the time limit for the receipt of medical documentation** supporting an employee's need for sick leave. The new rules require, in most cases, that medical documentation or certification be provided within 15 calendar days after it is requested. (This may sound familiar to some employees because ITS already uses these time limits.)

If an employee has made diligent

efforts to meet this deadline but has been unable to, the new rules provide that the employee must produce the medical documentation within a reasonable period of time, but no later than 30 calendar days after the request.

One reason for this new provision is that OPM believes it is important to establish time limits consistent with the current requirements for providing medical certification for sick leave used under the Family and Medical Leave Act.

OPM regulations can be pretty complicated, so you may want to get some advice if you think any of these new provisions may affect you. For additional information, contact:

Theresa Sayger
 Administrative Resource Center (ARC)
 Bureau of Public Debt
 Telephone 304-480-8266
<mailto:Theresa.Sayger@bpd.treas.gov>

You can also call:

ARC Pay and Leave Services Branch
 Main Number: 304-480-8400.

Note: Employees covered by a union agreement also should refer to that agreement for rules on sick leave usage.

GOVERNMENT TRAVEL AND TAX EXEMPTION

If you are a frequent traveler in your Government position, the information and internet sites offered here may make your travel planning a little easier, while also saving ITS some money.

The Comptroller General has ruled that the Federal Government is exempt from paying state and local lodging taxes only when payment is made by the Government directly to the vendor by government purchase order, check, or centrally billed credit card.

Since Federal employees are issued individually billed credit cards for travel, they typically don't qualify for the blanket exemption. But, there are some states and locations that choose not to apply certain taxes to Federal employee transactions. A little preplanning may result in savings through tax exemption on a case-by-case basis, depending on where your travels take you.

Ask ABOUT EXEMPTIONS, AND BRING YOUR FORMS.

When planning your Government travel and making reservations for hotels and/or car rentals, you should always ask about exemption from state and local taxes at that particular location. Even if you are traveling to a location that offers tax exemption, the place of business typically will not volunteer the information and you will have to ask when making plans or reservations or at least at the time of check-in.

Most hotels expect you to have the appropriate form(s) with you when claiming tax exemption. The box on the right has some helpful websites where you can find information and appropriate forms for particular locations. Keep in mind that some of these may not be complete or up to date; the best

resource may be to search on the particular state's website as well as asking at the place of business.

Some useful web site resources:

- > <http://www.taxadmin.org/fta/rate/b-0702.html>
This site contains **FTA Bulletin-B-07/02**, which includes an excellent chart of each State's policy.
- > <http://www.policyworks.gov>
This site is the GSA Travel Homepage and has a listing of jurisdictions where tax exempt certificates should be honored. This site also contains some very good questions and answers concerning travel.
- > <http://www.gsa.gov>
Access the Policy and Travel Management tabs to get to the State Tax Exemption Forms Overview document. This site contains information about individual states as well as many required forms for tax exemption.

EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE PROGRAM: UPDATE ON SAND CREEK

ITS employees recently were notified that the Sand Creek

How: Just call 1-888-243-5744 (TDD 1-800-627-3529).

Group again has been awarded the contract to provide Employee Assistance Program (EAP) services throughout OCIO. Below is a little more information about EAP services—the who, what, when, where, and why... plus the all important how and how much.

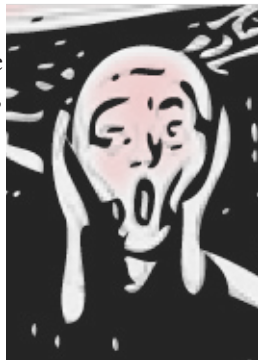
Who: All ITS employees and family members living within the employees' homes, and elderly parents living outside the home for elder care issues.

What: Professional counseling to help ITS employees and eligible family members with a wide variety of life challenges, including relationship problems, parenting issues, substance abuse, stress, anxiety, grief and loss, work-related concerns, and money problems.

When: 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year.

Where: Wherever our ITS employees live and work.

Why: To help employees and ITS. (When personal or work difficulties occur, the office setting may be disrupted and employee performance affected. The EAP helps employees and their families deal with such concerns, which in turn helps employees do their jobs.)



How much: Free to employees and covered family members up to six visits per concern.

Employee assistance uses a short-term service delivery model. Sand Creek offers six sessions per each individual and distinct problem. When persons need more than six sessions of help, Sand Creek will refer them to a resource beyond the EAP service. If the EAP counselor refers someone to other resources for longer-term or specialty assistance, then he or she is responsible for any costs of those services outside EAP (health insurance often applies).

EAP counselors work with those who contact them to assess problems and find the best course of treatment. Sometimes the best help is to get persons who need longer term care quickly to a counselor who can see them for the course of their treatment.

Support for Supervisors, too: It's also important to note that Sand Creek provides EAP services to supervisors who need assistance in dealing with difficult workplace situations. Don't hesitate to contact Sand Creek if you'd like some advice on such matters.

Graphic is based on Edvard Munch's *The Scream*, Lithograph 1895, Chicago Institute of Art.

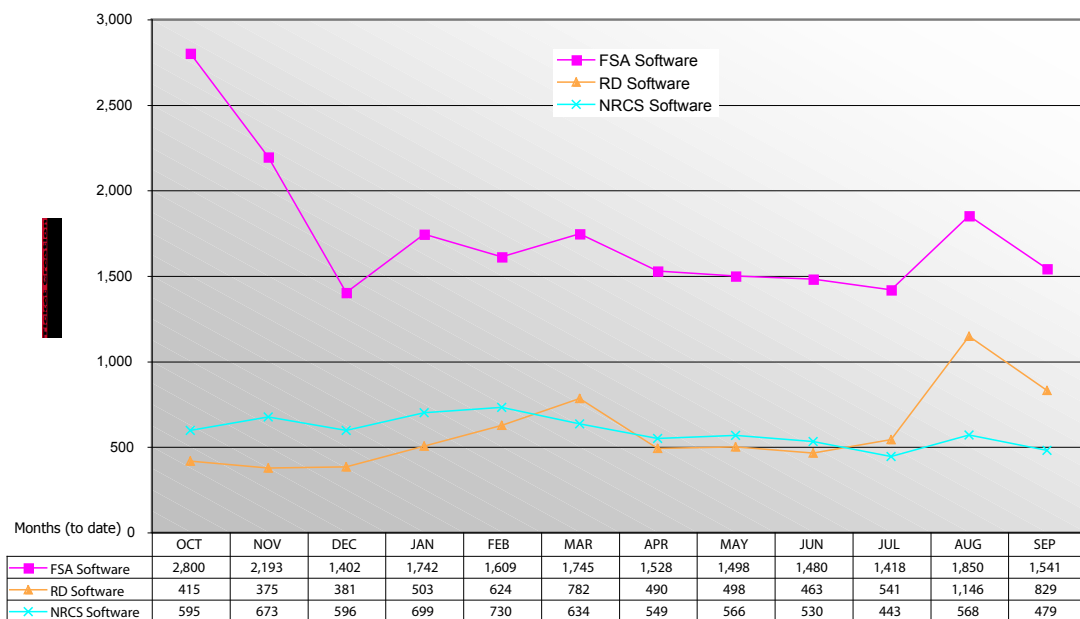
ITS Magic Merlin Ticket Analysis -FY06 Year End

From Rick Sabo, Customer Support Branch Chief

Ticket Request Subjects

	OCT	NOV	DEC	JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG	SEP	Totals
Agency Software Subjects	3,810	3,241	2,379	2,944	2,963	3,161	2,567	2,562	2,473	2,402	3,564	2,849	34,915
FSA Software	2,800	2,193	1,402	1,742	1,609	1,745	1,528	1,498	1,480	1,418	1,850	1,541	20,806
RD Software	415	375	381	503	624	782	490	498	463	541	1,146	829	7,047
NRCS Software	595	673	596	699	730	634	549	566	530	443	568	479	7,062
Agency SAAR Tickets	1,130	1,128	791	1,196	922	1,469	1,693	1,983	1,973	1,533	1,785	1,315	16,918
ITS SAAR Tickets	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	35	69	38	142
eAuthentication Tickets	1,332	1,114	1,110	1,144	1,548	2,619	1,647	1,442	991	1,250	3,305	2,147	19,649
COTS Subjects	1,884	1,797	1,441	1,714	1,341	1,534	1,387	1,744	1,972	1,499	2,061	1,787	20,161
Network/Telecom Services	399	481	281	248	198	278	333	318	307	708	593	516	4,660
Phone Services - SCA	372	416	272	408	434	525	483	570	550	538	788	657	6,013
Local System Administration	1,330	1,493	1,310	1,628	1,416	1,922	1,898	2,113	2,076	1,495	2,107	1,633	20,421
All Others	10,919	10,573	8,920	10,246	9,644	10,746	9,521	11,468	9,899	8,350	10,354	8,273	118,913
Total (ALL Tickets)	21,176	20,243	16504	19,528	18,466	22,254	19,529	22,200	20,241	17,810	24,626	19,215	241,792

FY06 Magic Merlin Ticket Analysis Chart



		Ratio Open/Closed
Total Tickets Created	241,792	
Total Tickets Closed	227,036	94%
Total Tickets Still Open	14,756	

USDA-OCIO-ITS
www.its.ocio.usda.gov
 Published by the:
Infrastructure Governance Division
 Email:
<mailto:ITS-Connections@wdc.usda.gov>

ITS Connections 9
 Volume 2
 Issue #4
 Nov. 10, 2006