

# **United States Department of Agriculture**

**FY 2008 E-Government Act Report**

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## Section 1: Peer Review System: E-Government in Practice

E-Government is framed around the central principle of improving the way the federal government uses technology as a means to enhance the services it provides. The Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service's (CSREES) unique mission is to advance knowledge for agriculture, the environment, human health and well-being, and communities by funding research, education, and extension programs at the state and local level. The Peer Review System (PRS) is an example of E-Government in practice. It is technology being used as a tool to increase the speed, reliability, and accuracy of the grant-making service that is so deeply rooted in CSREES' mission.

In FY 2008, CSREES was faced with the challenge of establishing a new research program and making an award in the same fiscal year. To meet this deadline, a new requirement in The Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008 (Farm Bill), the agency had to quickly complete all the preliminary tasks associated with making the federal funds available to the public under the Specialty Crop Research Initiative (SCRI). Seeking to streamline internal operations, CSREES identified the peer review process as a possible opportunity to make up time and improve their business process through the use of technology.

CSREES is required to conduct a peer review of all research grant applications for competitively awarded grants. A peer review consists of a panel of subject matter experts who assess the validity and the potential value of the research proposed by the applicant. CSREES had to find a way to improve upon a paper-based process for distributing materials and collecting comments from peer review panelists in order to deliver better service to the customer and reduce burden on the agency.

This narrative describes how CSREES improved an existing process by delivering it through an electronic medium. It describes how CSREES transformed its own (and other) agency operations by breaking down preconceived notions of how a process has to work and improving relations with valued external partners whose expertise is both precious and necessary, while shortening the application review period and eliminating costs associated with a paper-based peer review process.

### A. Transforming the Peer Review Process

Earlier in FY 2008, CSREES began allowing peer reviewers to conduct reviews of electronic applications through a Peer Review System (PRS) as part of an overall effort to improve the peer review process. CSREES realized immediately that this system could increase the efficiency of the peer review process as reviewers no longer had to wait for the overnight delivery of paper packages or CDs with application materials. The PRS allowed them to login directly to a Web-based system to download, read, and, if necessary, print the grant application to suit their personal needs.

In the past, the reviewers would receive grant applications they were to review in one of two ways: 1) a printed copy supplied at the expense of the applicant, or 2) an electronic copy on CD supplied at the expense of the agency. Prior to the implementation of the PRS, reviewers would submit feedback on grant applications to the agency via mail or email and it would be manually entered into the agency grants management system by CSREES staff. By enabling peer reviewers to retrieve, review, and comment on grant applications electronically, the PRS has significantly reduced the burden on agency personnel responsible for collecting comments and organizing them for inclusion in the final decision-making process.

When comparing the two methods of Peer Review, it is obvious that the new PRS is superior to the paper heavy, manual input system used previously. With the PRS, reviewers are able to review more grants in less time, avoid costs because the system is now paperless, and reduce the amount of human error as information is now transmitted electronically.

## **B. Maintaining an Ongoing Dialogue**

CSREES currently has in place a stakeholders' group comprised of staff from across all business areas who meet regularly to identify innovative uses for technology in support of the agency's mission. The purpose of the group is to provide a collaborative forum to discuss business transformation and recommend procedural and policy changes that support the electronic receipt and management of applications for CSREES funding and grants.

Additionally, the group serves as a platform to frame consensus on priorities that improve efficiency in processes and to communicate decisions across the agency and with partner organizations.

As an example of how this dialogue within the Department is serving to increase the sharing of ideas, USDA's Rural Development (RD) became aware of the PRS, and decided to use it for one of their grant programs. In doing so, they were able to achieve levels of efficiency and cost avoidance. The success of this inter-agency collaboration has allowed CSREES to continue to build relationships and identify further uses for the technology.

## **C. Identifying External Partners**

Peer reviewers are the primary external partners to the PRS. CSREES selects peer reviewers who are willing to commit time and energy to review grant applications and write up reviews as a courtesy to the agency from all over the world. These external partners state that having a system that permits them to fulfill their obligation to write peer reviews for grant applications and uses a process that is not cumbersome is paramount to submitting comprehensive reviews. In some fields of innovative research, expertise is quite rare; therefore, it is imperative that CSREES fosters and maintains the relationships developed with the academic community to ensure that the agency has sufficient manpower to review and process the thousands of grant applications it receives.

## **D. Identifying Improved Performance**

The implementation of PRS and changes to CSREES' business process have improved performance in many areas. For example, in order to maximize the time applicants had to respond to the funding opportunity the agency had to accomplish peer review in a radically shortened time frame. Whereas a paper-based review process might require a period of several weeks to complete, CSREES found a way to complete the process in a matter of days by automating the peer review process. Using a sample of review assignments from FY 2008, CSREES found that they had cut the assignment time from 32 to 15 days and avoided significant costs as well.

## **E. Quantifying Cost Savings and Avoidance**

Cost savings and avoidance are key components to any successful E-Government initiative and CSREES has achieved this with PRS. The cost savings are often seen in the form of a reduction of paperwork required to complete tasks, time saved by employees due to the increased efficiency of an electronic system, and cost avoidance by the customers who are no

longer burdened with time consuming manual submission of necessary documents and applications.

Prior to being able to submit electronic application packages, applicants submitting to research programs with peer review requirements had to provide multiple copies of their application package to accommodate the peer review process. The average application package consisted of nine copies of an 80 page application. CSREES received approximately 3,000 applications in FY 2008 alone, which would have amassed to approximately 2.1 million pages. Applicants avoided the cost of having to print, copy, and ship these grant applications because CSREES was able to transfer electronic applications into the Peer Review System. That cost avoidance also translated into time savings for agency employees who were able to compile peer review comments electronically versus thumbing through page after page of comments and manually entering them into a grant management system.

## **F. Ensuring Availability of Government Information and Services**

The Peer Review System is a Web-based application. Only a very select group of people who are required to use the information are granted access.

The PRS is 508 compliant to ensure accessibility for people with disabilities.

## **G. Applying Effective Capital Planning and Investment Control Procedures**

CSREES' investment in developing the PRS is included as part of a larger IT investment, which meets the requirements of USDA's integrated IT governance process (IGP) that includes capital planning and investment control, cyber security and enterprise architecture. The IT investment management components of the IGP were defined, documented, and implemented in order to ensure proper management of all IT investments. The review process allows all knowledgeable elements within the Office of the Chief Information Officer to bring their particular level of insight to bear on each investment, before it is allowed to proceed farther into the development process. The information and recommendations that follow from these reviews provide feedback to the agency planning team and are incorporated into the agency's project development plan.

## **H. Planning to Identify Further Initiatives**

The role of the Chief Information Officer is to develop, maintain, and facilitate the implementation of a sound, and integrated information technology architecture. The centralization of these responsibilities within the Office of the Chief Information Officer provides USDA with a comprehensive understanding of IT initiatives throughout the Department. USDA will leverage this familiarity with the IT portfolio to identify future initiatives.

## Section 2: USDA Information Management Activities

### A. USDA's Information Technology Strategic Plan and Enterprise Architecture Transition Plan

The Information Technology (IT) Strategic Plan outlines the United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) commitment to appropriately gathering, protecting, and disseminating information, and is available at [http://www.ocio.usda.gov/n\\_USDA\\_IT\\_Strategic\\_Plan.pdf](http://www.ocio.usda.gov/n_USDA_IT_Strategic_Plan.pdf). This vehicle serves as a framework for planning and communication that facilitates the partnerships between the IT and business communities at USDA and promotes more effective decision-making and dissemination of information to the public.

The USDA Enterprise Architecture (EA) Transition Plan is a comprehensive address of all USDA's organizational units and business operations. It prescribes a high-level roadmap for USDA to modernize its operations and computer systems. The USDA EA Transition Plan is available at [http://www.ocio.usda.gov/e\\_arch/doc/USDA\\_EATP\\_Version1\\_5\\_20070327.pdf](http://www.ocio.usda.gov/e_arch/doc/USDA_EATP_Version1_5_20070327.pdf).

### B. Information Dissemination Management

In accordance with Section 207(f)(2) of the E-Government Act of 2002, USDA published a priorities and schedules document for posting Web content on USDA.gov. It provides guidance for identifying content to be published on the Web site and the priority in which it should be posted. The priorities for posting content on USDA.gov as well as agency and staff office Web sites are at <http://w3.usda.gov/comments/contentinventory.html>. With regard to publishing schedules, USDA's policy is to make available to the public all content that is deemed cleared for the public domain as soon as it is released. Standard publishing times are 10:00 AM to 2:00 PM Eastern Time, but USDA is not bound or confined by the standard publishing times. We publish on demand any time of the day that is necessary.

USDA organized and categorized information intended for public access by making it searchable across agencies through a simple "Browse by Audience" search located on [www.usda.gov](http://www.usda.gov). This allows the public to search for information about USDA without first knowing which agency is responsible for the information.

As a further means to improve the dissemination of and access to information, USDA integrated the Google search appliance into its enterprise Internet infrastructure, which permits searching of all files intended for public use on the Web site and displays prioritized search results in order of relevancy. Response times, equivalent to industry best practices, are included with the results. Twenty-four agency Web sites are using Google as of October 2008. Google is also being used for USDA intranet sites.

### C. USDA's Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) Compliance

USDA provides visitors with a reference guide for FOIA, located at [http://www.usda.gov/da/foia\\_guide.htm](http://www.usda.gov/da/foia_guide.htm). This guide provides an overview of the provisions of FOIA which govern Federal agencies' responsibilities and the public's rights. It also outlines how and where inquiring parties should make a FOIA request, required response times, the conditions for expedited processing, fees and fee waivers, initial request determination, appeals for restricted access, and information regarding judicial review.

Through an easily navigable Web site, USDA simultaneously adheres to the stipulations of FOIA, while providing transparent access to the public-at-large. The USDA Web site, <http://www.usda.gov/da/foia.htm>, outlines the implementation of Executive Order 13392—Improving Agency Disclosure of Information, and provides links to the following:

- FOIA Guide
- USDA FOIA Fee Schedule
- Agency Mission Areas
- Electronic Reading Room (Reports)
- USDA FOIA Regulations
- FOIA Contacts
- Text of the Freedom of Information Act
- USDA Privacy Policy Statement
- U.S. Department of Justice – Freedom of Information Act Home Page

In compliance with the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) of 1966, the Electronic Freedom of Information Act (E-FOIA) Amendments of 1996, and specifically, Section 207(e), “Public Access to Electronic Information,” USDA provides the means for the public to access the vast majority of agency documents, aside from those protected by legal exemptions and exclusions, such as personal privacy and investigative documents. USDA has established an electronic reading room, which includes agency policy manuals, opinions made in the adjudication of cases, and an index of records released by FOIA that are subject to subsequent FOIA requests. Information regarding the reading room is available at [http://www.usda.gov/da/foia\\_reading\\_room.htm](http://www.usda.gov/da/foia_reading_room.htm). Within the reading room, members of the public can also access the USDA annual reports from 1996 to the present and they may view contracts and purchase orders established between USDA and the private sector.

#### **D. Dissemination of Federal Research and Development Funding Activity**

USDA is fulfilling its responsibility under Section 207(g), “Access to Federally Funded Research and Development,” by providing public access to Department research projects at <http://www.usda.gov>. A list of research projects is available in the directories of Science.gov at <http://www.science.gov>, and RaDiUS at <https://radius.rand.org> to provide easy access to all-encompassing government-wide research materials. The guidelines outlined and links provided on [http://www.ocio.usda.gov/qi\\_guide/scientific\\_research.html](http://www.ocio.usda.gov/qi_guide/scientific_research.html) regulate the scientific research information used, produced, and published by USDA in order to preserve the objectivity, utility, quality, and integrity of scientific research disseminated by Federal agencies.

The Forest Service and the Agricultural Research Service (ARS) are two particularly noteworthy examples of agencies within USDA that have made access to research and development information accessible to the public and employees.

The Forest Service Research and Development (FSRD) is the largest forestry research organization in the world. The FSRD serves private forest landowners through their investigations into new processes and methods of recycling wood products. The four main areas in which FSRD seeks to disseminate information to the public are:

- Resource Valuation and Use Research;
- Science Policy, Planning, Inventory, and Information;
- Vegetation Management and Protection Research, and;

- Wildlife, Fish, Water and Air Research.

Available at <http://www.fs.fed.us/research>, the Forest Service Research and Development Web site provides research and policy developments regarding our precious natural resources to both the public and Federal employees.

ARS is USDA's primary scientific research agency that seeks solutions to everyday agricultural problems by frequent collaboration with research partners from universities, companies, organizations, and foreign countries. The mission of ARS is to pursue scientific innovation and to disseminate the discoveries to the public as useful technology and knowledge.

## E. Formal Agency Agreements for Public Dissemination of Information

In order to create a high quality and efficient process for the public to access USDA's information and services, and to support the exchange of information when needed, the Department works with a diverse group of external partners and contractors.

The National Agricultural Library (NAL) expands public access to agricultural information and facilitates the successful development of the Library's programs and services through partnerships with external libraries, organizations, and private industry. For a list of NAL's partnerships, please visit [National Agricultural Library Partnerships](#).

The Cooperative State Research, Education and Extension Service (CSREES) partners with more than one-hundred colleges and universities that comprise the nation's Land-Grant University System. These universities are designated to receive unique Federal support in order to further pursue CSREES' unique mission to advance knowledge for agriculture, the environment, human health and well-being, and communities. Information on the Land-Grant University System and CREES' partnerships is available at [http://www.csrees.usda.gov/qlinks/partners/state\\_partners.html](http://www.csrees.usda.gov/qlinks/partners/state_partners.html). CSREES promotes Higher Education Challenge Grants for the benefit of 1862, 1890, 1994, and Hispanic-Serving Land-Grant Institutions. These USDA-led Land-Grant Institution programs seek to improve research, extension, and teaching in the food and agricultural sciences by strengthening institutional capacities so that participants may work with businesses to promote efficient and profitable operations. Information about the respective grants and the application process is available at <http://www.csrees.usda.gov/fo/fundview.cfm?fnum=1082>.

USDA partners with Google to provide an enterprise-wide simple search and location instrument for public visitors to <http://www.usda.gov> and other agency Web sites. A partnership with such a powerful and pervasive information generating system as Google allows those with even the most limited internet experience and skill to easily locate USDA information.

USDA uses the *Stellent* content management system, which provides a single, strong content repository for managing Web content, documents, and digital assets, as well as addresses the long-term retention and disposition of managed content and published sites. This system allows more people to create new and modify existing content to provide faster and more efficient information dissemination.

Finally, USDA improves access to and dissemination of government information to the public through its participation in several key Presidential Initiatives. USDA's partnerships with Business Gateway (<http://www.business.gov>), Grants.gov



(<http://www.grants.gov>), E-Rulemaking (<http://www.regulations.gov>), and GovBenefits.gov (<http://www.govbenefits.gov>) provides opportunities for efficient exchange of USDA information between the Federal government and the public.

- Business Gateway seeks to improve the service and reduce the burden, financially or otherwise, for business and private citizens interacting with the Federal government through various projects. Serving as a one-stop access point for government services available to the private sector, information and key resources regarding business development are found in the Business Resource Library.
- Grants.gov seeks to reduce current government inefficiencies, meet E-Government objectives, and benefit both citizens and the government by streamlining the process and easing the encumbrance of searching and applying for Federal grants. Through the E-Government Storefront, this initiative helps to remedy the arduous process associated with applications in different agencies with clear instructions for both public and private entities.
- E-Rulemaking is a collaborative, inter-agency initiative tasked with the establishment of an automated, integrated repository for Federal rulemakings, which electronically consolidates and manages the dockets of Departments and agencies to provide easy access across the Federal Government.
- GovBenefits.gov is a partnership between sixteen Federal agencies that seeks to consolidate over 1,000 Federal and Federally-funded, State-administered benefit and assistance programs, and that provides readily available application information, as well as a tool to help users determine their benefit eligibility in both English and Spanish.

## **F. USDA's NARA-Approved Records Schedules and Progress Inventory**

In response to the NARA Bulletin 2006-02, "NARA Guidance for Implementing Section 207(e) of the E-Government Act", promulgated on December 15, 2005, and the National Archives and Records Administration's (NARA's) letter of September 15, 2006, USDA submitted a list of scheduled and unscheduled electronic information systems to NARA in October 2006. The list included all of USDA's major IT investments identified as part of our Capital Planning and Investment Control (CPIC) process. USDA works with NARA on an ongoing basis to schedule USDA records, including electronic systems.

The Office of the Chief Information Officer manages USDA's Records Management Program, for which NARA outlines the major responsibilities that Federal agencies currently have for preserving electronic records. The USDA has well-established processes and procedures to ensure the proper management, scheduling, and disposition of USDA records at <http://www.ocio.usda.gov/records/index.html> (protected by USDA's eAuthentication Service).

Per NARA's request in September 2006, USDA Agencies provided NARA with an inventory describing USDA mission-related electronic records systems and series that were previously scheduled as well as those that will require scheduling over the next year. Of the total number of mission-related electronic records systems reported to NARA as of September 30, 2008: 81 have been scheduled, 5 are pending NARA's review and approval, and 46 are not applicable for reporting because they are infrastructures and do not contain records. USDA agencies are actively working with NARA to develop records schedules for

all records existing in electronic systems by September 30, 2009. USDA has and will continue to transfer electronic records that have permanent retention to NARA.