ARS ❑ CSREES ❑ ERS ❑ NASS
Policies and Procedures

Title: Automation Policy

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This Replaces:

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This directive establishes an
automation policy and objectives for
the Agricultural Research Service.

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1. PURPOSE

An information system is most often defined as a systematic, formal organization of components configured in such a way that data can be readily and accurately recorded, stored, processed, retrieved, and communicated as required by a variety of users. Information resources include all of the information systems, data, sources, services, staff resources and processes that are useful to the organization in meeting its information requirements. Information itself is a valuable resource to the ARS.

In ARS automated information systems, data processing operations are performed in order to:

- Provide information to management in support of planning, organizing, controlling, and decisionmaking activities.

- Provide a variety of reports, as required, to internal and external users.

- Convert data (specific individual facts) to management information.

- Provide information on ongoing research projects and research accomplishments.

- Accomplish administrative and program support operational functions.

- Increase field level capability to manage and access information.

- Better utilize the basic management support systems in functional areas such as personnel, procurement, property, financial management, technology transfer, budget allocation, and ARS project reporting.

2. BACKGROUND

The ARS conducts fundamental and applied research in the food and agricultural sciences. The National Program Staff is responsible for program management (PM) including planning and coordinating the national research programs. Administrative Management (AM) is responsible for planning and coordinating the Agency administrative support activities. The Area Directors are responsible for the implementation of approved research programs and they insure the quality of the science. Day-to-day program and administrative management of

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approximately 120 field Locations is carried out by 8 Area offices, while leadership of science and management of resources at the Location level are the responsibility of ARS Research Leaders, Laboratory Directors and Center Directors.

Most ARS automated information systems have been developed to meet the information requirements of a specific AM or PM functional group. Each of these functionally oriented systems has its own files. In order to satisfy the current and emerging management information needs, the Agency must develop an integrated information structure which has as its source a number of the application files to assure effective handling of Agency leadership and management responsibilities.

3. OBJECTIVES

ARS will pursue the following automation objectives subject to technical and cost constraints:

- A national focus will be pursued as part of all system designs.

- National automated systems will be reviewed for cost and program impact prior to allocation of resources.

- Management units will control data needed solely for their own use.

- Scientific research (bench level) automation efforts will NOT be included in any integrated management information system.

- ARS will exercise central control over data needed to support integrated information requirements.

- ARS will use the National Finance Center (NFC) and other Departmental data bases as its official data base except where ARS has unique internal requirements not supported by NFC. In these instances, ARS will maintain official PM and AM data bases at Beltsville.

- ARS will strive to minimize the number of sites where official data bases are maintained.

- ARS will provide the capability to integrate management information from official data bases.

- ARS will maintain an integrated working data base which will contain selected data elements from the PM/AM/NFC official data bases. Standard definitions for data elements will be applied to all files to be included in this integrated data base. Data elements will be identified based on Agency requirements to share data cross-functionally.

- Organizational units with authority to effect actions will have direct access to the official data bases. All costs associated with access to data bases will be paid by the user.

- ARS will maintain hardware and software standards. All ARS systems shall be developed to meet ARS hardware and software standards.
- Standard computer hardware and software shall be used at Locations to capture PM and AM data at its point of creation, enter data into appropriate systems, and provide electronic data transmission between organizational units.

- All system design efforts will fully consider impact on end users at the Location level. Provisions will be made for adequate and timely training of users. ARS will involve users in identifying emerging automation requirements, designing and implementing new systems, and modifying existing systems.

- ARS systems will be designed to minimize cost of their maintenance. "Off-the-shelf" software will be used where it meets ARS needs. Systems will be modified and improved consistent with evolving management requirements and to improve efficiency.

- ARS will obtain operational and technical support through contract and will maintain a core of in-house technical expertise to provide managerial and technical oversight and direction to the ARS automation effort.

ARS managers at all levels must have the capability to respond to both present and future management information needs. This capability will: (1)increase productivity; (2) reduce duplication of work efforts; (3) increase integrity of information; (4) improve communications and sharing of information; (5) provide greater access to common information; (6) increase timeliness of information processing and retrieval; and (7) increase overall coordination among the diverse elements of the organization. Information will be organized and readily available so that its relevant portions can be found and extracted to support management

and decisionmaking processes where and when needed throughout the ARS organization.

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