



In July 2007, the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) revised its FOIA Improvement Plan to combine two proposed improvement areas that had the same outcome and to clarify and make more specific the steps required to achieve all goals.

NRCS combined its improvement areas related to expedited service and to automated tracking capabilities because they had the same goal – to develop a uniform national and state tracking system. The unified improvement area for automated tracking capabilities captures the goals and milestones previously set out in the two separate areas. At the same time, NRCS clarified the steps necessary to reach each of its other goals. It did so by simplifying descriptions of the steps and adding specific target dates.

NATURAL RESOURCES CONSERVATION SERVICE (NRCS)

A. Characterize overall nature of agency's FOIA operations (degree of detail optional), with optional reference to areas preliminarily considered for agency review.

NRCS has a decentralized FOIA program. There is one headquarters office staffed by a full-time FOIA Officer in Beltsville, Maryland, 50 state offices staffed by a part-time FOIA Officer, and numerous field and area offices. The majority of FOIA requests received by NRCS pertain to conservation programs. NRCS processes around 300 FOIA request per year.

All FOIA requests to NRCS are generally sent to either the NRCS State Office or to the National Office. For requests for records in the state, the name and state office address of the State Conservationist or the State FOIA/PA Officer is provided to the requester from headquarters or state staff or may be obtained from the NRCS website. Requests for records which are national in scope should be sent to the National FOIA Officer. Information about the FOIA process can be obtained from the NRCS website.

B. List all areas selected for review

- * Proactive disclosure of information
- * Politeness/courtesy
- * Forms of communication with requesters
- * Backlog reduction/elimination

C. Include narrative statement summarizing results of review.

NRCS takes a personable approach when communicating with requesters. NRCS responds to FOIA requests by mailing personal letters to requesters. These letters may include an acknowledgement of receiving the request, the status of a pending request or appeal, and a response regarding the outcome of the request, which may include the mailing of responsive documents. Letters may also address particular needs or concerns of the requester. Moreover, letters are generated by headquarters and state staffs on office computers using word processing software. Telephone calls and electronic mail messages are also used to communicate with requesters.

NRCS maintains a FOIA website which contains information on how to make a request to NRCS, including information on fees, a FOIA reading room which provides

links to frequent FOIA requests, and contact information for headquarters and state offices. The Agency's policy on FOIA may also be located on the website. The Electronic Directives System, also located on the NRCS website, provides access to manuals, handbooks and technical references issued by the Agency. Records provided to three or more requesters in a particular state may be listed on the NRCS website specific to that state.

D. List all areas chosen as improvement areas for agency plan.

- Affirmative Disclosure under subsection (a)(2)
- Proactive disclosure of information
- Overall FOIA website improvement
- Improvement of agency's FOIA Reference Guide
- Automated tracking capabilities
- Electronic FOIA--automated processing
- Multi-track processing
- Troubleshooting of any existing problems
- Expedited processing
- Backlog/reduction elimination
- Politeness/courtesy
- Forms of communication with requesters
- Process by which necessary cooperation is obtained from agency "program personnel"
- Additional training needed
- Contracting out/hiring of contract employees
- Recycling of improvement information gleaned from FOIA Requester Service Centers

E. IMPROVEMENT AREA PLANS

1. Affirmative disclosure under subsection (a)(2)

GOAL: NRCS will provide monthly updates of disclosure required under (a)(2)

Target completion: August 31, 2007 and continuing

Steps to achieve goal:

1. Monitor website by the 5th of each month
2. Post new information to website within 14 days of monitoring when updates are necessary
3. Send email to state offices once a year as reminder to update state website and FOIA reading rooms beginning October 1, 2007

Measure of success:

Website is monitored monthly and new material is posted on website and noted on website as new material

2. Proactive disclosure of information

GOAL: NRCS will provide information on the FOIA website that is in the public's interest without the need for a FOIA request

Target completion: March 30, 2008

Steps to achieve goal:

1. Develop agenda item for quarterly teleconferences asking states to discuss public interest items by September 30, 2007
2. Review responses by states by October 10, 2007
3. Update website within 14 days of receiving information

Measure of success:

Website is updated with public interest items

3. Overall FOIA website improvement

GOAL: NRCS will improve the design of the FOIA website

Target completion: February 1, 2008

Steps to achieve goal:

1. Review websites of other agencies to determine best design for NRCS customers by November 1, 2007
2. Work with IT to develop design that is easy to use and understand by January 2, 2008
3. Provide links to appropriate USDA pages and DOJ FOIA page
4. Implement design by February 1, 2008

Measure of success:

Design of improved website implemented

4. Improvement of agency's FOIA reference guide

GOAL: NRCS will review current guide and determine if guide should be revised

Target completion: April 1, 2008

Steps to achieve goal:

1. Review FOIA reference guide by January 20, 2008
2. Determine if guide should be revised by March 1, 2008
3. Revise guide by April 1, 2008 if necessary

Measure of success:

Guide has been reviewed and revised if necessary

5. Automated tracking capabilities

GOAL: NRCS will develop a uniform national and state office FOIA Tracking System. Previously, NRCS also included the development of this tracking system under the goal related to expedited processing. With this revision we are now including the milestone of the expedited processing goal under the automated tracking capabilities and deleting the expedited processing goal.

Target completion: August 1, 2007

Steps to achieve goal:

1. Agency IT staff will develop the database and system interfaces to afford ease of use. **(Completed June 8, 2007)**
2. Notification of NRCS state offices of the pending implementation of the uniform tracking system by June 15, 2007 **(Completed June 19, 2007)**
3. Conduct regional training/discussion teleconferences with state offices. **(Completed July 16, 2007)**
4. Make necessary adjustments to report formats by July 23, 2007
5. Issue National Bulletin (an Agency operational Directive) and provide instructions for tracking system access to all states by July 30, 2007

6. Implement use of tracking system by August 1, 2007

Measure of success:

Automated tracking system has been implemented.

6. Electronic FOIA--automated processing

GOAL: NRCS will research software with redacting elements

Target completion: December 1, 2007

Steps to achieve goal:

1. Research software by October 1, 2007
2. Present research and recommendations to Director, Management Services Division by November 30, 2007.

Measure of success:

Director, Management Services Division has been provided research to consider

7. Multi-track processing

GOAL: NRCS will develop an electronic multi-track processing system in a spreadsheet format to be used by all state offices

Target completion: December 31, 2007

Steps to achieve goal:

1. Create agenda item for quarterly conference calls to discuss implementation of the multi-track processing system by August 30, 2007
2. Contact NRCS IT staff about creating a spreadsheet that would accommodate multi-tracks used in processing by September 30, 2007
3. Have system available for test run by October 31, 2007
4. Issue National Bulletin and provide instructions for processing system to all states by November 30, 2007
5. Make necessary adjustments by December 10, 2007

6. Have the processing system implemented by December 31, 2007

Measure of success:

System developed and in use by state offices

8. NRCS will troubleshoot any existing problems with existing request tracking

GOAL: NRCS will identify and address problems with the existing tracking system

Target completion: October 31, 2007

Steps to complete goal:

1. Identify problems of the existing request tracking system by August 1, 2007
2. Develop standard to address or eliminate problems by August 31, 2007
3. Standard reviewed by Director, Management Services Division by October 1, 2007

Measure of success:

Standard to address or eliminate problems are implemented by the state offices by October 31, 2007

9. Backlog/reduction elimination

GOAL: NRCS will address states' backlog through question and answer training through quarterly teleconferences

Target completion: December 28, 2007

Steps to complete goal:

1. Review backlog of existing requests (**Completed December 1, 2006**)

2. Develop agenda item for quarterly teleconferences to answer questions regarding requests by September 30, 2007
3. Offer National Office assistance to states to assist with issues raised by and in backlog request by December 31, 2007.

Measure of success:

Quarterly teleconferences are held and responses to question and answers are addressed

10. Politeness/courtesy

GOAL: NRCS will provide customer service training in quarterly regional teleconferences

Target completion: September 2007 and continuing quarterly

Steps taken to complete goal:

1. Gather information on customer service from Internet and other Federal agencies by July 30, 2007
2. Develop a quarterly agenda item to discuss customer service with states by August 30, 2007
3. Discuss customer service with states and areas of improvement beginning with the September 2007 teleconference

Measure of success:

Customer service training has been provided and customer service continues to be a topic for quarterly conference calls.

11. Forms of communication with requesters

GOAL: NRCS will review current correspondence with requesters and update as necessary

Target completion: January 1, 2008

Steps to complete goal:

1. Review acknowledgement and response correspondence from states by October 30, 2007

2. Contact other USDA agencies to review their correspondence by November 30, 2007

3. Develop agenda item to discuss updated language to use in correspondence by December 30, 2007

4. Issue National Bulletin (an Agency operational Directive) to states regarding updated language

Measure of success:

Correspondence has been reviewed and updated templates for correspondence have been distributed to states

12. Process by which necessary cooperation is obtained from agency “program personnel”

GOAL: NRCS will issue a memorandum to the Deputy Chief for Programs as a reminder to staffs to review the FOIA Policy

Target completion: January 31, 2008

Steps to achieve goal:

1. Prepare draft memorandum for Director, Management Services Division by November 1, 2007

2. Have Director review memorandum by November 10, 2007

3. Make adjustments to draft memorandum by November 12, 2007

4. Present memorandum to Director for approval by November 20, 2007

5. Director will present memorandum to Deputy Chief for Management for signature by December 1, 2007

6. Deputy Chief’s signature on memorandum by January 30, 2008

7. Deliver memorandum to Deputy Chief for Programs by January 31, 2008

Measure of success:

Memorandum is distributed and FOIA policy is reviewed.

13. Additional training needed

GOAL: NRCS will provide information about training to all State FOIA Officers through quarterly regional teleconferences

Target Completion: September 30, 2007

Steps to achieve goal:

1. Add agenda item to quarterly teleconferences to discuss training sponsored by DOJ, USDA Graduate School, and NRCS by August 30, 2007
2. Encourage state FOIA officers to attend training through teleconferences and email when training opportunities develop

Measure of success

Training information is provided quarterly

14. Contracting out/hiring of contract employees

GOAL: NRCS will hire subject to budget approval a contract employee/consultant at the national level to assist both national and state offices with FOIA processing and document review

Target Completion: June 1, 2008

Steps to achieve goal:

1. Review workload to determine need by November 1, 2007
2. Discuss need with management by December 1, 2007
3. Contact NRCS personnel to develop solicitation by February 30, 2008
4. Solicitation opens to the public by April 1, 2008
5. Review bids by May 10, 2008
6. Contractor/Consultant hired by June 1, 2008

Measure of success

Contract employee/consultant is hired

15. Recycling of improvement information gleaned from FOIA Requester Service Centers

GOAL: NRCS will develop an agenda item to have state offices share information on customer feedback

Target completion: September 30, 2007

Steps to achieve goal:

1. By July 31, 2007, NRCS will contact other agencies to gather ideas about how improvement information may best be obtained.
2. By August 31, 2007, NRCS will review 1) the length of time to respond to requests, 2) each state's method of responding to requests, and 3) current customer responses to requests from each state.
3. By September 30, 2007, NRCS will develop an agenda item to discuss customer feedback in the quarterly teleconferences.
4. Finally, by September 30, 2007, NRCS will establish an agency-wide standard and method to seek and receive customer feedback.

Measure of success:

Agenda item for quarterly conference calls has been established and customer feedback is shared

F. For the entire plan, group the improvement areas into the following time periods:

1. Areas anticipated to be completed by December 31, 2007

- Affirmative disclosure under subsection (a)(2)
- Automated tracking capabilities
- Multi-track processing
- Troubleshooting with existing request tracking
- Expedited processing
- Backlog/reduction elimination
- Politeness/courtesy
- Recycling of improvement information gleaned from FOIA Requester Service Centers

Additional training needed
Electronic FOIA--automated processing

2. Areas anticipated to be completed by December 31, 2008

FOIA website improvement
Improvement of agency's FOIA reference guide
Process by which necessary cooperation is obtained from agency
 "program personnel"
Forms of communication with requesters
Contracting out/hiring of contract employees
Proactive disclosure of information

3. Areas anticipated to be completed after December 31, 2008

None at this time