

Foreign Agricultural Service Backlog Reduction Plan

The Foreign Agricultural Service's (FAS) current Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) backlog grew over the past year, partly as a result of the agency's reorganization. As the agency's new structure continues to take hold, FAS is committed to reducing its backlog entirely over the next three years.

In support of the aim, FAS performed an analysis of those requests that are currently overdue within the agency. This analysis revealed that:

- FAS receives a relatively small number of FOIA requests each year, usually averaging about 50 requests per year. While few in number, FAS FOIA requests generally have become more complicated and require more coordination with other USDA agencies.
- The FAS reorganization affected timeliness. New supervisors were unfamiliar with FOIA requirements. Newly defined program areas required new FOIA contacts to be named.
- The oldest perfected request in backlog status with FAS dated from fiscal year 2006.

Given these considerations, FAS's backlog reduction plan focuses on providing the support required by FAS program offices to ensure that requests are processed promptly and efficiently, enabling the agency to reduce the age of the agency's 10 oldest perfected requests.

FAS plans to take the following steps to eliminate its backlog of overdue FOIA requests:

1. Educate management and program area staff on the FOIA process and need for timeliness.
 - a. Initial meetings were held during August 2008 with two program areas primarily responsible for backlog supervisor to impress upon them the importance of closing out old requests. As a result, five of the agency's six oldest requests have been closed.
 - b. Additional program area meetings will be scheduled by October 1, 2008.
 - c. Follow-up meetings will be scheduled on an annual basis.
2. Reduce the age of FAS's 10 oldest FOIA requests by:
 - a. Adding monitoring of the completion of FAS's 10 oldest FOIA requests to monthly management reports by September 30, 2008.
 - b. Reporting backlogged requests directly to program area supervisors to ensure their attention and action by September 30, 2008.