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Agriculture

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TO: Users of Financial and Human Resources Systems

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AUG 14 2006

SUBJECT: SAFEGUARDING PRIVACY ACT INFORMATION

A key role that we share as members of the USDA community deals with the appropriate protection of the data that has been entrusted to us. As is typical with many government financial and human resources systems, we have information subject to Privacy Act provisions. Each of us must take the appropriate steps to ensure that this information is properly protected and managed. To be clear, safeguarding people's personal information is not an option, it is a responsibility engrained into every financial and human resources position.

Information protected by the Privacy Act includes any personal information that is maintained by a Federal agency in a group of records where an individual's information is retrieved by a name or other type of identifier, such as a social security number, any identifying number, a fingerprint, a voiceprint, or a photograph (called a System of Records). It does not matter whether the records are on paper, maintained in a filing cabinet or in a computerized database. The information is covered by the Privacy Act while it is stored in the System of Records, while it is in use as a file or document at your workspace, or while it is displayed on your computer either in the office or at home when teleworking.

In addition, many of the reports from our USDA systems and the documents we process as we operate those systems will have protected information.

As you work with protected information, remember to secure reports, documents and files before leaving your workspace. Do not leave reports or documents in plain view. Before disposal, shred sensitive reports and documents in an approved shredder. When working with financial and human resources computer systems, remember to log out or lock your workstation before leaving your workspace.

Recently, the news media has focused on incidents where the confidentiality of information protected by the Privacy Act was potentially compromised. We would like to remind each of you that it is your responsibility to protect Privacy Act information

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including reports, paper documents being processed, and files that may be in your workspace or in your attaché case.

Scenario: You have the names, SSNs, home addresses and home phone numbers of all of the employees in your division on your laptop. You do not want to go to the effort to password protect the information. You leave the laptop on the bus when commuting to work. Doing so is a Privacy Act violation.

Scenario: Remember that juicy case you were working on that you were just dying to gossip about with your friend and that the USDA investigator wanted to review? To whom can you disclose information about this case? Disclose only to the investigator as this is official disclosure. Gossiping with a friend, however, is not official business and is not permitted. Doing so is a Privacy Act violation.

Scenario: An angry citizen calls you and requests access to information pertaining to a relative. She says that if you don't tell her, she is going to take it all the way to the Supreme Court as a violation of the Privacy Act. Even with the threat of action, you should not disclose any information to the caller. Doing so is a Privacy Act violation.

As a USDA employee or technical contractor using a USDA financial or human resources system, you are in a position where you access or process an individual's personal information that is protected by the Privacy Act. Remember, you are personally responsible for protecting Privacy Act information from misuse or disclosure, and subject to criminal penalties for misuse or unauthorized disclosure. For more information, please visit www.whitehouse.gov/omb/privacy and www.usdoj.gov/oip/oip.html

As we increase our awareness of Privacy Act issues in our workplace, we are confident that each of you will perform your duties in a manner that ensures the confidentiality of the personal data under your care. If you have questions or concerns, please contact your supervisor.