

NRCS BACKLOG REDUCTION PLAN

The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is required to prepare a backlog reduction plan to reduce the backlog of Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests received. In FY 2005, seven requests were reported as pending at the end of the current year. In FY 2007, fifteen requests were reported as pending at the end of the current year. These pending requests were likely requests that were received near the end of the fiscal year and were not processed before that time. NRCS has a small backlog of requests, if any; however, the plan to reduce any backlog is outlined below.

STAFFING LEVELS

NRCS currently has 1 National FOIA Officer, 1 Contract FOIA Assistant, and 50 State FOIA Officers processing FOIA requests. The National FOIA Officer and the Contract FOIA Assistant work full time processing requests that have national implications and process FOIA appeals. The National FOIA Officer is responsible for updating the FOIA website, updating agency policies and manuals, completing the FOIA Annual Report, issuing national bulletins and other agency memoranda, and staying abreast of new guidance and information regarding FOIA and disseminating that guidance and information to the State FOIA Officers. State FOIA Officers are also called State Administrative Officers and process FOIA requests as part of their duties as State FOIA Officers. They respond to requests that require state documents and responses. Any requests that are received by the State Offices that require a national response are sent to the National FOIA Officer for processing. NRCS has done the following regarding staffing:

1. NRCS reviewed its FOIA staffing levels in 2005.
2. NRCS determined that an additional person was needed in the national office
3. NRCS hired a contract FOIA assistant to assist with training needs, providing guidance to the state offices, and assist with processing requests and appeals.
4. NRCS determined that its national staffing level is appropriate to provide state support

EXAMINING THE FOIA PROCESS AND OPERATIONS

NRCS has sought to reduce its backlog or eliminate it through several goals.

1. NRCS has developed a uniform national and state office tracking system to keep track of all pending requests and appeals
2. Works with agency IT staff to provide updates to tracking system

3. Provides updates and guidance to state offices about tracking system, as necessary
4. NRCS provides state and field office training through question and answer sessions from quarterly teleconferences
5. NRCS continues to offer National Office assistance with state backlog through teleconferences

REDUCING BACKLOGGED REQUESTS

NRCS plans to focus on reducing the number of backlogged requests by:

1. Meeting (through teleconferences) with State FOIA Officers to provide training and guidance
2. Determine from meetings if there is a need to restructure the state staffs
3. Reviewing tracking system to obtain list of oldest requests and following up with those states to ensure that those requests are being processed
4. Research affordable redaction software for national office and state offices that maintain the most backlogs

CLOSING 10 OLDEST REQUESTS EACH YEAR

NRCS plans to close the 10 oldest requests each year by:

1. Reviewing the electronic tracking system monthly to determine the oldest backlog requests.
2. Teleconferencing with states that have the oldest backlog to determine status of request
3. Updating the tracking system, if necessary, for requests that have been processed
4. Developing a plan with each state with the oldest backlog requests to determine the best approach to process the request.
5. Providing National Office guidance and assistance to State Office during the processing of the backlogged request
6. Updating the tracking system of the completion of the backlogged request

