United States Department of Agriculture
Research, Education, and Economics

ARS ❏ NIFA ❏ ERS ❏ NASS
Policies and Procedures

Title: Social Media Use and Communication

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Originating Office: Information Staff, OA/ARS

Distribution: ARS Headquarters, Areas, and Field Locations

> This P&P states the ARS procedures and responsibilities for social media use and communication.

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1. Introduction

This document describes Agricultural Research Service (ARS) policies and procedures for using and communicating via social media (new media) and social networking tools. These policies and procedures are established to ensure proper use, conduct, and information dissemination using social media tools and platforms in accordance with Agency, Departmental, and Federal guidelines and regulations. Transmitted information (including employee dialogues—one to one and one to many) and employee conduct using social media and social networking tools should reflect the highest quality standards in communicating messages and information to the public, and should adhere to Departmental and Federal regulations.

Use of these tools to communicate official business on behalf of the Agency, Department, and Federal government should—

- Contribute to scientific knowledge and report information pertaining to ARS and its research.
- Contribute to technology transfer and information dissemination about ARS and its research.
- Explain Agency research and programs to the public in accessible, plain language (see Plain Language Act, PL 11-1274).
- Reflect proper ethical conduct and standards.
- Be in accordance with Departmental new media regulations and guidelines (DR 1495-001).

This P&P covers use of all social media and social networking tools and platforms for communicating officially with the public on behalf of the Agency, Department, and Federal Government.

2. Statement of Policy

ARS will ensure information disseminated to the public is in accordance with Agency, Departmental, and Federal policies and guidelines, and meets appropriate quality, communication, and ethical standards.

Under Departmental regulations, employees/agencies are required to submit a communication package (including a business case or strategic communication plan, Form AD-3022, and a justification; see Appendix 1) and obtain USDA Office of Communications (OC) approval before establishing or accessing social media/social networking accounts for official business. In addition, an ARS Social Media Justification should accompany the package (see Appendix 2).

ARS Information Staff (IS) review and approval of the communication package and ARS Social Media Justification form is required for all social media accounts established on behalf of an ARS program, location, laboratory, and/or office for official use, without exception. In addition, the ARS Office of the Chief Information Officer (OCIO) must review and clear all information technology and security protocols (e.g. security plans/threat and vulnerability assessments) relating to establishing new accounts, without exception. Users and account managers must submit a communication package and justification for each new account. IS will be responsible for reviewing these packages to ensure new accounts will enhance the Agency's and

Department's overall communication strategies and efforts. Where appropriate, this review will be in consultation with Area Directors, Division Directors, Research Leaders, National Program Leaders, and other ARS leadership.

IS and OCIO must review and clear communication packages and will submit the package to USDA OC for approval. IS will communicate the outcome—whether or not the Department approved the application package—to the requesting office.

2.1 Guidelines

If the communication package is approved, IS will provide additional guidelines (evaluation and metrics, reporting, messaging planning and guidelines, and records management) to the originating office (account requestor).

Participation and/or involvement with organizations using specific social media tools and networks does not imply Agency/Departmental support or endorsement of those tools or organizations.

Personal or private users of new media Web sites or accounts should not claim to officially represent the Agency, the Department, or its policies; or use Agency, Department, or other U.S. Government seals or logos. Personal or private activities may not violate Federal ethics rules.

Use of social media tools and technologies for personal or private use via government-issued equipment should be in accordance with ARS 253.4 "Use of Information Technology Resources."

ARS employees will further adhere to USDA's New Media policies (Departmental Regulation 1495-001).

Note: In reference to specific social media tools, **the Department maintains only one official Facebook page, Flickr account, and Blog**. The Department **WILL NOT** grant permission to USDA agencies, locations, laboratories, or programs to establish such accounts. ARS employees are encouraged to contribute content to existing Departmental accounts, and they should contact IS for guidance and instructions.

3. Authorities

ARS 116.0, Freedom of Information Act and Privacy Act Guidelines
ARS 150.1, Dissemination of Public Information by ARS
ARS 251.8, Records Management
ARS 253.4, Use of Information Technology Resources
OMB Circular A-130, Management of Federal Information Resources
Departmental Regulation 1495-001, New Media Roles, Responsibilities and Authorities
Departmental Regulation 3080-001, Records Management
DM 3525-002, Internet Use and Copyright Restrictions

Title 18 U.S.C., Part I, Ch. 93, Sec. 1913

4. What Is Social Media/New Media?

4.1 General Definition

Social media (also called new media—see "Official USDA Definition" below—and Web 2.0) describes the process of communicating and creating content and sharing information in a one-to-one, one-to-many, or many-to-many format using a variety of Web- or mobile-based tools and technologies. Social media tools are used to establish and build relationships and networks designed to create open, transparent, collaborative conversations. A multitude of social media technologies and tools exist, and new ones are developed frequently. Although these tools have created new, exciting, specialized, and efficient ways of reaching many customers and stakeholders, not every tool/platform will be the best or most appropriate for communicating with your target audience. Please consult with the ARS Information Staff (IS) if you need further guidance. For the purpose of this P&P, we will use the term "social media" to describe these technologies and tools.

4.2 Official USDA New Media Definition

The Department defines new media as "a number of technologies that facilitate interactions among stakeholders using a variety of Web- or mobile-based tools and technologies." "Web 2.0," "social media," "social networking," "social media channels," and "social media platforms" are also terms used to describe new media that use "digital technologies, social engagement, and content delivery. Such activities involve many technologies and communication methodologies including, but not limited to, blogs, photo and video sharing services, social networking, geospatial mapping tools, discussion forums, and wikis. These technologies may enable social tagging and bookmarking and mobile messaging."

5. Social Media Accounts

5.1 ARS Social Media Accounts

Many different social media tools, technologies, and networks exist. The ARS Information Staff (IS) serves as the Agency's social media coordinator and liaison with the Department; coordinates and maintains social media activities and accounts on behalf of ARS; develops communication plans and messaging strategy on behalf of ARS; works with other ARS staff, locations, and office in developing communication plans and messaging strategy; and contributes to the Department's social media efforts. IS works closely with ARS leaders and Department officials to ensure consistent, unified messaging on ARS research, programs, and services on behalf of ARS and USDA.

5.2 Applying for and Establishing New Accounts

ARS offices, programs, and locations interested in establishing new government accounts must

submit a communication package (including a business case or strategic communication plan, Form AD-3022, and a justification; see Appendix 1 and Appendix 2) to IS for coordination with, and approval from, USDA Office of Communications. These plans, along with form AD-3022, must be reviewed by the Supervisor/Research Leader/Laboratory Director/Center Director/Institute Director/Area Director/Director or other management equivalent prior to being submitted to IS.

The approved package and justification form (see Appendix 2: Sample ARS Social Media Justification) must be submitted to IS for review.

As appropriate, IS will work with ARS' Leadership Team (ARS Administrators, Deputy Administrators, Area Directors, National Program Leaders, etc.) for final Agency review and approval before transmitting the package to the Department for official approval. All new research-related sites must be cleared and approved by the ARS Office of National Programs (subject-specific National Program Leader (s)).

If Departmental approval is granted to establish a new account, IS and ARS Office of the Chief Information Officer (OCIO) will provide specific guidance on establishing, maintaining, monitoring, and evaluating the account. **New accounts should support and augment existing ARS and USDA communication efforts.**

Note: DO NOT establish a new social media account using a ".gov" e-mail account or site without prior approval from the Department.

ARS leadership has the right to close/terminate the account if it does not support the overall Agency mission.

5.3   Employee Social Media Account Access/Use

Employees accessing or using non-USDA/non-Government social media accounts on official Government equipment or during official business hours, but using a personal e-mail/account, should adhere to all Agency and Federal guidelines. (See also Social Media Access Using a Personal or Private Account.)

Employees shall not establish ANY social media accounts/Web sites using their ".gov" e-mail accounts or other Government credentials without prior approval from the Department.

5.4   Social Media Access Using Personal or Private Accounts

Employees may decide to use or access professional and other organizations' social media accounts using their personal or private e-mail accounts. Those employees should note "Personal or private users of new media Web sites or accounts should not claim to officially represent the Department or its policies, or use the Department or other U.S. government seals or logos. Personal or private activities may not violate Federal ethics rules." (See DR 1495-001.)

All ARS OCIO security protocols and other Federal guidelines apply to using personal and private accounts to access social media and other sites using official Government equipment and during official business hours.

6. Communicating Using Social Media

6.1 General Guidelines

When communicating information to the public in an official capacity (using USDA/ARS titles and credentials, including using ".gov" e-mail accounts), appropriate communication and scientific standards (see ARS 150.1) and Federal codes of conduct apply. Communicating on social media networks/platforms using your Federal credentials means that **you are representing the Agency, USDA, and the Federal Government in general**. Policy statements and personal opinions and conclusions should not be given on behalf of the Agency or USDA.

6.2 Content Guidelines

Content should focus on the program/Agency/Department mission. Messages communicated to the public using social media tools should be coordinated with the ARS Information Staff. All messages for media use **MUST** be cleared through ARS Information Staff. The Research Leader/Laboratory Director/Center Director/Institute Director/Director/National Program Leader/Supervisor and/or appropriate manager **MUST** approve messages related to ARS scientific research, programs, and services prior to their being released to the public. (Follow your location procedures for presenting public speeches and similar formats to the public. ARS Information Staff can provide guidance as needed/appropriate.)

ARS employees shall not endorse or support specific organizations or products on behalf of the Agency or USDA.

ARS employees should be inclusive in their conversations with the public and adhere to USDA and Federal nondiscrimination policies.

Be vigilant and safeguard personally identifiable information and confidential information in accordance with Federal guidelines. Many social media tools and Web sites gather and maintain certain data on site users, which practice/policy is usually stated in their "Terms of Use/Service Agreements" and disclaimers.

Maintain professional courtesy and consideration. When appropriate, work with other ARS colleagues to ensure consistent, collaborative messaging on research topics and ideas. Public interest is best served by presenting robust, comprehensive information as a whole versus in small, fragmented parts.

When engaging with organizations, the public, and potential research partners, ARS scientists should discuss and share information on published, peer-reviewed research findings only. Public disclosure of non-published/non-disclosed research could result in loss of valuable patent

protection in certain instances or violate applicable confidentiality agreements. For further guidance, consult the ARS Office of Technology Transfer. (See also ARS 152.1.)

ARS employees acting in an official capacity should maintain appropriate records of their responses and communications on social media platforms in accordance with Agency, Departmental, and Federal records management regulations.

Every attempt should be made to support ARS and USDA social media efforts—i.e. when applicable, content should be posted on all appropriate ARS and USDA sites. Employees and account users/managers should work with the ARS Information Staff to generate and share content on Agency and Departmental social media sites.

6.3   Antilobbying Law

Content posted to social media sites shall not contain any information or comment that can be construed as advocating the audience to lobby Congress concerning increased appropriations or specific legislation, or to influence any political campaign (DR 1410-001).

Area Directors (or their designated representative), Research Leaders, Laboratory Directors, Center Directors, Institute Directors, and other line managers and supervisors are responsible for ensuring that dialogue shared on these tools and Web sites **does not** include pleas for funding, explicit or implicit, of specific programs or locations whether the audience is directly Congressional or not. Any employee found guilty of violating the antilobbying law can be terminated, fined, and/or imprisoned. When in doubt, consult the USDA Office of Ethics, Science Ethics Branch. (See also Title 18 U.S.C., Part I, Ch. 93, Sec. 1913.)

6.4   Specific Social Media Tools

Contact the ARS Information Staff or ARS Office of the Chief Information Officer (OCIO) for Departmental guidelines on accessing and establishing accounts for specific social media tools/platforms.

7. Social Media Contributors/Account Users/Account Managers

For the purpose of this P&P, social media users are categorized into three groups—social media contributors, account users, and account managers. Each of the three groups is described below.

Note: Social media contributors/account users/account managers must ensure content **does not** contain pleas for increasing or maintaining funding, explicit or implicit; or pleas for saving a research program, location, or position; or other content that appears to lobby Congress or encourage the reader to do so. (See "Antilobbying Law" in Section 6 of this P&P, "Communicating Using Social Media.")

7.1   Social Media Contributors

The social media contributor is someone who provides ideas and content to a specific media tool/platform account. Employees can, and are encouraged to, provide content and ideas to support ARS and USDA social media efforts. Content must be pre-approved by the appropriate ARS manager (s), Research Leader, Area Director, National Program Leader, Director, Supervisor, etc. Work with the ARS Information Staff (IS) to create and generate content and messaging strategies for disseminating information on ARS research, programs, and services on various social media platforms. IS will work with other ARS social media account users (see next section) and social media account managers (see next section) to distribute content on the best, most appropriate ARS social platform/outlet—including to other established USDA accounts. It is possible that a contributor may not have access to a specific social media account but may still contribute ideas and content to other ARS social media accounts for public dissemination.

7.2   Social Media Account Users

The social media account user is someone who accesses and contributes content to a specific social media tool/platform account. That person may be responsible for posting and responding to specific public comments and questions but may not be the "owner" or manager of the account. The social media account user must abide by the "Antilobbying Law" in Section 6 of this P&P, "Communicating Using Social Media."

7.3   Social Media Account Managers

The social media account manager is the account owner and has rights/permission to access, post, and make changes to the account and its information. The social media account manager is responsible for establishing, maintaining, monitoring, and evaluating the account. The requesting office will designate this person. The social media account manager is also responsible for reporting metrics and content analysis to the ARS Information Staff (IS) on a schedule determined by IS. The account manager will also monitor account conversations to ensure all Agency, Department, and Federal guidelines are met. The account manager is responsible for updating ARS line management and IS on trends, topics, and conversations that are important to the Agency and USDA in general. The account manager will work with IS on appropriate messaging and strategy for that account. The account manager is also responsible for abiding by all Agency, Departmental, and Federal regulations regarding social media use (including Records Management, Freedom of Information/Privacy Act, and other Federal guidelines and regulations).

The social media account manager will ensure the social media account and its content abide by the "Antilobbying Law" in Section 6 of this P&P, "Communicating Using Social Media."

8. Staff Responsibilities

8.1 ARS Information Staff (IS)

ARS Information Staff (IS) will disseminate information to the public that is clear, concise, and factually based. IS will determine messaging strategies, content appropriateness, and relevance to the Agency's and Department's social media efforts in consultation with ARS line managers. IS will determine message timeliness, news value, relevance, and the appropriateness of using specific communication tools and outlets for disseminating messages to the public and media on behalf of ARS.

IS will manage the social media functions for the Agency and, in doing so, will—

- Serve as the Agency's Social Media Program Coordinator/Liaison with USDA on social media and Agency messaging on such tools/platforms.
- Review all communication packages (business cases/strategic communication plans, and forms) prior to submission to the USDA Office of Communications. IS may make recommendations/changes to communication packages before final submission to the Department.
- Submit the final communication packages to the Department for approval.
- Provide guidance to social media contributors, account users, and account managers on creating and generating content that supports ARS and USDA social media efforts.
- Work closely with account managers to establish, maintain, monitor, and evaluate USDA-approved accounts.
- Work closely with OCIO to ensure accounts meet appropriate information security and privacy protocols, guidelines, and regulations.
- Work closely with OCIO to coordinate and monitor all Agency accounts and related metrics.
- Compile and report social media metrics and analyses on behalf of ARS for submission to the appropriate ARS and USDA officials.
- Evaluate the Agency's overall social media efforts.
- Provide guidance and make recommendations to ARS leadership on social media efforts and communication strategies.
- Ensure Agency accounts and related content **do not** contain pleas for funding, explicit or implicit, or other content that appears to lobby Congress or encourage the reader to do so. Ensure content **does not** include lobbying pleas to save a research program or location, or for funding support.
- Ensure that ARS social media efforts comply with ARS policies and procedures and USDA regulations and guidelines.

8.2 ARS Office of the Chief Information Officer (OCIO)

OCIO will be responsible for ensuring all Agency social media accounts adhere to Agency, Departmental, and Federal information technology (IT) and security regulations and guidelines.

OCIO will—

- Review and identify new digital tools or technologies to support and help evaluate the Agency's social media efforts.
- Make recommendations to IS and ARS leadership on new tools, technologies, and platforms to support the Agency's social media efforts and increase Agency outreach to customers and stakeholders.
- Provide guidance to and coordinate with IS to ensure Agency accounts meet appropriate information security protocols, guidelines, and regulations.
- Provide guidance to IS and social media account managers managing and monitoring Agency accounts with regard to information technology standards and metrics.
- Work with USDA's OCIO on reporting account status and security protocols.
- Work with locations, IS, and the Department to ensure social media technologies comply with established USDA IT security, archival, and records management requirements.
- Manage ARS Web and IT infrastructure related to social media efforts and requirements.

8.3 ARS Area Directors' Offices / ARS National Program Offices / ARS Staff Offices

ARS Area Directors' Offices (Area Directors or their designated representative) and/or other ARS National Program Offices or Staff Offices will be responsible for ensuring all field locations, research laboratories, program offices or other staff offices adhere to ARS and USDA policies, procedures, and regulations pertaining to social media and related communication efforts.

ARS Area Directors' Offices/ARS National Program Offices/ARS Staff Offices will—

- Review and approve all communication plans generated from Area field locations/National Program Offices/Staff Offices prior to submission to ARS Information Staff (IS). It may be necessary to work with IS prior to preparing and submitting a communication plan.
- Ensure all Area field location/National Program Office/Staff Office social media accounts comply with Agency and Department regulations and guidelines.
- Appoint, manage, and provide guidance to social media contributors, account users, and/or account managers in their respective Area/National Program Office/Staff Office.
- Monitor and review research-related and other content to be published on social media platforms to ensure compliance with ARS scientific research standards/guidelines and Area/National Program Office/Staff Office procedures.

Edward B. Knipling: /EBK/   Date: December 5, 2011
Administrator
Agricultural Research Service

Appendix 1: New Media Request Form

USDA **New Media Request Form**

Mission Area or Agency:		New Media Channel/Tactic:	[i.e. social networking, challenge, ideation]
Division/Program:		Tool/Provider:	[i.e. Twitter, Challenge.gov]
Public Affairs Contact:		Proposed Start date:	
Webmaster/CIO Contact:			
Terms of Service Status:	☐ Apps.gov ☐ Tool already in use at USDA ☐ Review Still Required		
Supporting Agencies, Programs:	[Identify other USDA programs or agencies that may have related goals, shared information sources]		
Proposed URL, account name:	[Identify proposed account name]		

Resources and Process

Staff Resources:

[Individuals responsible for oversight, maintenance or moderation of tool, account or channel]

Concept Proposal and Communication Plan

Describe:

 1. Mission – Why do you want to establish a new media account/channel?

2. Goals   - What do you want to accomplish?

3. Why is this the best technology or tool for the above stated goals?

4. Intended audience

5. Content and information to be shared, events covered, etc

6. Evaluation and success factors

Attach communication plan

Reviewed By:		Date:	
Approved By:		Date:	
Last Updated By:		Date/Time:	

AD-3022 (Rev. 5/2011)

Appendix 2: Sample ARS Social Media Justification

Instructions: Don't exceed one page; print on official letterhead; delete these italicized lines and substitute appropriate information where indicated in brackets; if you're not in a research lab or in one of the areas, substitute comparable levels of hierarchy in the signature lines.

[date]

  SUBJECT: Justification for Establishing a New Social Media Account

       TO: Tara T. Weaver-Missick, Branch Chief/Social Media Coordinator, ARS Information Staff

    FROM: [Originator/Requestor]

This is to request Departmental approval to establish a new social media account.

Proposed name of account:

What is the purpose and goal of this account/content?

The target audience for this account [describe audience].

How will this tool be used to support agency goals?

How often will information be posted?

Name and contact information for account manager:

APPROVED: _____Date: _____
                  Research Leader

APPROVED: _____Date: _____
                  Area Director

APPROVED: _____Date: _____
                  Sandy Miller Hays, Director, ARS Information Staff

12/1/11