

At The One-Year Mark, Here Is Our Progress On The Civil Rights Recommendations

by Ron Hall, Office of Communications

“Go for the gold!”

Those were the marching orders which Secretary **Dan Glickman** offered to Departmental employees at an all-employee meeting on March 2, held in the Patio of USDA's Whitten Building in Washington, DC. It was also broadcast live via satellite to USDA field sites around the country.

Its purpose was to recognize those employees who had contributed to developing a report titled “Civil Rights at the United States Department of Agriculture--A Report by the Civil Rights Action Team,” plus those who had helped implement the 92 recommendations in the report. That 121-page publication, dated Feb. 1997, was the product of the “Civil Rights Action Team” (CRAT) of employees which Glickman had established in Dec. 1996 to examine a number of issues related to civil rights at USDA.

The date of the all-employee meeting commemorated the one-year anniversary of the issuance of that report. It also marked the formal completion of the work of the various Civil Rights Implementation Teams (CRITs) of employees which were charged with the task of implementing those 92 recommendations.

As he individually recognized the members of the various CRAT and CRIT teams and complimented them for their efforts, Glickman emphasized that “Our challenge now is to institutionalize these changes and create a USDA that is the model for a positive, diverse workforce.”

“I am asking each employee at USDA to help...with the civil rights work still to be accomplished,” he noted. “That is why I am borrowing an Olympic phrase--'Go for the gold!'--and am asking each of you to 'Go for the gold!' in the area of civil rights.”

In addition, employees received available copies of two USDA documents. The first was a 16-page publication titled “Unlocking the Barriers--Keys to Communicating with Under-Served Customers.” It was prepared to help employees “communicate more effectively with limited-resource customers and under-served communities,” said **Denise Decker**, a quality management specialist with the Natural Resources Conservation Service.

“It's a communications guidebook,” added **Dave White**, director of NRCS's Conservation Communications Staff, “to provide guidance for employees in serving all customers, including people with disabilities and customers who do not speak English.”

The second, a 120-page publication titled "Civil Rights at the United States Department of Agriculture--One Year of Change," provided a progress report on civil rights efforts at USDA since Glickman had formed the CRAT in Dec. 1996. It also delineated the status of each of the 92 recommendations in the Feb. 1997 report.

In a memorandum to USDA employees, dated March 2 and titled "One Year Anniversary of Civil Rights Action Team (CRAT) Report," Glickman noted that, to date, USDA had implemented 90 of the 92 recommendations. In that memo he also highlighted some of the recommendations.

For instance, he said that the Department has a new reprisal policy "to ensure that employees who file civil rights complaints are not retaliated against." The Sept. 1997 issue of the **USDA News** carried a story on the new policy.

"As part of that effort," noted **Gary Schmidt**, director of the Appeals and Grievances Staff in the Office of Human Resources Management, "USDA has established 'reprisal panels' which have been hearing and deciding upon those allegations of reprisal filed at USDA on or after November 1, 1997." He added that, as of April 21, approximately 100 employees have received training to participate on those panels.

Second, all employees, both at HQ and field locations and agricultural attache posts overseas, are to receive mandatory civil rights training annually. According to **Linda Varner Mount**, chief of the Agency Support and Special Emphasis Programs Division in the Office of Civil Rights, it is designed to ensure that every employee "receives the same training, with the same content and tone."

"The plan for the next two years," added **Jean Mahoney**, USDA's Disability Compliance Manager and day-to-day coordinator of the training, "is to give employees training on such civil rights topics as sensitivity, sexual harassment, civil rights and equal employment opportunity laws and regulations, and discrimination complaint processes."

Third, Glickman noted the creation of a national Office of Outreach. "This Office," explained **Sam Thornton**, its director, "will coordinate program delivery and outreach efforts throughout USDA, and focus on reaching small and disadvantaged farmers, ranchers, producers, and other members of under-served populations."

Fourth, USDA created a new position in the Office of the General Counsel. That position--associate general counsel for civil rights--heads up a Civil Rights Division, also newly created in OGC, staffed with attorneys who develop expertise in, and work full-time on, civil rights, providing civil rights legal guidance to Departmental officials and agencies.

Fifth, according to CR Deputy Director for Programs **Jeremy Wu**, USDA's complaints process--for both program and employment complaints--is being streamlined, and the Department will be providing alternative ways to resolve disputes to address conflicts that arise in the workplace.

Anjali Athavale, a CR computer specialist, said that, as of April 20, USDA has settled or closed 304 of the 1,088 complaints of discrimination in program delivery that had been active at USDA between January and November 1997. CR computer specialist **Lisa Wigfall** added that, also as of April 20, USDA has settled or closed 1,010 of the 2,142 formal allegations of discrimination in employment that had been active at USDA, also between January and November 1997.

“My goal,” Glickman affirmed, “is that every customer and employee be treated fairly and with dignity and respect.” ☐