

USDA Is Ahead of Schedule on Staff Year Reductions and Savings

But "Downsizing Is Never Easy"

by Ron Hall, Office of Communications

USDA's efforts at reorganizing and streamlining have resulted in staff year savings of more than \$900 million in a two-year period, and those savings are ahead of schedule.

"We are cutting staff and saving money, all ahead of schedule," Secretary **Dan Glickman** recently noted. But he then advised that "Downsizing is never easy, and USDA employees deserve a great deal of credit for this early success."

USDA's streamlining plan calls for an overall reduction of 13,000 staff years, dropping from a level of 114,000 in FY 1993 to 101,000 staff years by the end of FY 1999.

According to **Steve Dewhurst**, director of the Office of Budget & Program Analysis, the Department's staff year usage at the end of FY95--which was targeted to be at 109,000--was already down to 104,000, or 5,000 fewer staff years. This resulted in a savings of about \$900 million in staff year costs over the past two years--and was \$300 million more than the staff year savings originally estimated through FY95.

Dewhurst underscored that those staff year reductions were accomplished through normal attrition, including personnel changes and retirements, and the use of special personnel authorities such as early outs and buyouts.

"Staff reductions are projected to result in a total savings of over \$2.8 billion by the end of FY99 in staff year costs alone," he affirmed. "In addition, nearly 4 out of every 10 supervisory positions are to be eliminated."

USDA announced a major restructuring of the Department in Oct. 1994, including reducing the number of agencies from 43 to 29, consolidating administrative management operations, and closing or moving field locations to create "one-stop service" centers. The Oct.-Nov. 1994 issue of the **USDA News** outlined the specifics of that reorganization.

Since then, Dewhurst advised, the consolidation of USDA field locations into service centers has been on track, with offices in 397 locations having moved or closed between Dec. 6, 1994 and Oct. 1, 1995.

"USDA plans to complete its field restructuring of its original 3,700 locations by moving or closing offices in nearly 700 more locations by the end of 1997," he affirmed. "This is to result in 2,536 one-stop service centers across the country."

Additional reforms

OBPA Associate Director **Larry Wachs** added that additional reforms and reorganization within the Department are underway. For instance, the consolidation of administrative functions within mission areas has been completed in six of the seven program mission areas. The plans for administrative consolidation within the seventh program mission area--Natural Resources and Environment--is still under study as part of the discussions with Congress on the reorganization of the Forest Service.

"Consolidation of administrative functions eliminates unnecessary duplication by having only one staff provide administrative services for the entire mission area," he noted.

As a second example, Wachs said that the Department has undertaken a comprehensive effort to reform management support services. " 'Reengineered' financial, personnel, procurement, and other administrative processes," he said, "will assist agencies in providing needed services to manage their operations with fewer people."

Third, USDA's Streamlining Plan calls for an 18-22 percent reduction in personnel specialists, acquisition specialists, accountants, auditors, and budget specialists. "Organizational layers are being eliminated, and the number of supervisors is being reduced by 37 percent--which will increase the employee:supervisor ratio from 8:1 to 11:1," he noted. "A 14 percent reduction in high grade positions is also included in our Plan."

Fourth, Wachs said that the Department is continuing its efforts to improve the way it handles civil rights discrimination complaints. "The counseling/mediation function for equal employment opportunity complaints," he said, "has been consolidated to create a centralized, professional staff to handle employment discrimination complaints in a more timely and efficient manner."

Fifth, in an effort to improve customer service, USDA staffers have developed a variety of methods to respond to customer service issues such as forming internal teams or councils, installing toll-free numbers for customers, holding customer feedback meetings, and developing customer service training for employees.

"Streamlining of USDA started at headquarters in Washington," Glickman said. "We cut through the layers of red tape, with the focus of providing better customer service in the field."

"USDA employees are on the front lines, where they can provide information, answer questions, and better serve the American people." ❧