

## There's No Place Like Home Page at USDA

by Lena Hogan, Office of Communications

When **Dorothy** landed in Oz, it didn't take long before she realized that "There's no place like home." As USDA solidifies and expands its position on the World Wide Web, more and more of its employees are concluding that, "There's no place like home--page."

And they've been able to say that since November 1994 when the Office of Communications launched USDA's home page.

First, some background: the Internet is a large network of computers, comprised of numerous separately run smaller linked computer networks (an "Internetwork," hence the name Internet).

According to **Greg Parham**, a National Program Leader with the Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service, the Internet has more than 60 million users in over 100 countries, and the rate of growth continues to be explosive as more networks and users are connected.

Through the Internet or "Net," resources and information are shared globally. "The Net gives users access to a vast collection of information unlike any before in the history of humankind," Parham observed.

The Internet supports several methods for sending and retrieving information. The World Wide Web is one such method that is available to many USDA employees as well as to those not at USDA who wish to obtain--electronically--more information about the Department's programs and services.

**Bill McAndrew**, a computer specialist in the Office of the Chief Information Officer, said that the Web may be accessed through so-called "browsers." Internet "browsers" access Web pages of information. He said that Mosaic, Netscape, and Microsoft's Internet Explorer are the browsers that may be used by USDA employees and others who wish to access the Web.

"Much of the information on the Net is organized into Web pages which appear on computer screens," noted McAndrew. The "title" page for each site on the Net is called its home page. The home page usually provides information about an organization's mission or its programs, or it may provide links to other related information.

USDA's "URL" (Uniform Resource Locator) or address on the World Wide Web is <http://www.usda.gov>. When an employee enters this URL or links to USDA's home page from another Web site, he/she is currently given six "buttons" which represent links that he/she may click on for related USDA information. The six links in USDA's home page are called "News and Information," "What's New," "Missions," "About USDA," "Opportunities," and "Search/Help."

**Charles Hobbs**, a public affairs specialist in the Office of Communications, works on design and electronic publication of USDA information on USDA's home page. "Because the Web is a visual medium, our goal is to provide a page that is simple, clean, and visually appealing," he said.



United States Department of Agriculture

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Send comments and suggestions about content of USDA's Home Page to  
Victor Powell at Inetnet: vic.powell@usda.gov

The driving force behind the influx of Internet activity among federal agencies was Executive Order No. 12906, dated April 11, 1994. It instructed government agencies to make electronic information available to interested parties on the information superhighway.

To comply, many USDA agencies established their own individual home page sites.

"In April 1994 the Natural Resources Conservation Service was the first USDA agency to launch a home page on the Web," said **Kimberly Prochnow**, World Wide Web specialist for NRCS in Fort Worth, Texas. "Several other agencies in USDA would soon follow NRCS's lead and establish their own individual Web sites," she noted, "and ultimately USDA developed its own Department-wide home page several months later."

Prochnow added that there are many advantages to having USDA's home page on the Web. "One advantage," she said, "is that not only U.S. citizens, but now people around the world, may at any time access USDA information."

When the Department officially announced its all-USDA home page on the World Wide Web, Secretary **Dan Glickman** explained that he was committed to making information on USDA's programs and services and agriculture available to the American people in as many ways as possible. And today, a high volume of people are visiting the USDA-wide home page as well as individual USDA agency-level Web sites.

According to **Craig Leavitt**, a computer specialist with the Management Services, Network Communications Technology Services Division in Departmental Administration, between Sept. 1 and Dec. 1, 1996, the USDA-wide home page received an average of nearly 12,000 hits per week and just over 1,700 hits per day.

**Vic Powell**, an information access leader in the Office of Communications, is the "Webmaster," or manager, of USDA's home page. He noted that this availability of instantaneous information worldwide comes without any additional cost to the American taxpayer.

"Before, when information had to be printed and mailed out or faxed out, there was a delay in world-wide distribution," he noted. "But now, when someone on the other side of the globe wishes to obtain our information, it's available instantaneously--with a cost savings in printing and distribution."

According to **Michael Spencer**, a CSREES electronic publishing specialist, the rural agri-business community benefits from accessing USDA's home page because it has provided a link to urban and suburban communities.

"During this period of explosive Web growth," Powell said, "the technology is changing so fast that often by the time an application is installed it is obsolete." He noted that this is one reason why the development of a dynamic home page at USDA is important.

**Stan Prochaska**, director of OC's Communications Coordination and Review Center who managed the development of USDA's home page, explained that a Departmental regulation dated August 10, 1995 and titled "USDA Home Page Policy" places responsibility for content of home pages in the Office of Communications.

"A handy rule of thumb for the delineation of responsibilities for the USDA home page can be easily summarized by noting that if one can see it on a computer screen, then it's generally the responsibility of OC," he explained. "But if it's not visible, it's generally the responsibility of Departmental Administration."

"USDA's presence on the World Wide Web reflects cooperation between the Department's technical staff and public affairs staff," Prochaska underscored.

If, as a USDA employee, you wish to get on board, there is one major issue: accessibility. Today, in addition to the Department's home page which OC maintains, over 20 USDA agencies and offices maintain individual agency-level home pages.

USDA employees both at headquarters and in the field receive their Internet services via the USDA Internet Access Network with a few exceptions. The Internet Access Network is managed by the National Information Technology Center which has offices in Fort Collins, Colo., Kansas City, Mo., and in Washington, DC. The Management Services, Network Communications Technology Services Division--formerly the Washington Service Center or WSC--in Washington, DC, manages the Internet activity in the Washington metropolitan area.

**Rodger Blevins**, the director of DA's Network Communications Technology Services Division, said, "At this point approximately 50 percent of all USDA employees--in the Washington metro area--now have access to USDA's home page from their individual worksites."

Concerning comparable estimates for home page access at work by USDA's field employees, **Mike Thomas**, director of the Telecommunications Services Division with DA's National Information Technology Center in Fort Collins, said that such statistics are currently unavailable on a field employee-by field employee basis. "However," he affirmed, "all USDA agencies currently have access to USDA's home page, even though they differ in the degree to which their respective employees have access to it."

"Agency and Department efforts are underway to ensure that all field employees who need it will have home page access within the next few years," he said.

Thomas added that the expense for the USDA Internet program is paid through the Department's Working Capital Fund, which bills each USDA agency annually.

"The World Wide Web is not just a technological innovation, it is an exciting new medium for communicating," observed **Martha Cashion**, communications coordinator in OC. "And USDA has a wealth of valuable information which it can--and is--making available to the world through this medium."☞