



DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE VENDOR COMMUNICATION PLAN

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Department of Agriculture Vendor Communication Plan

1. Introduction

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) recognizes the importance of communicating with potential vendors early and often throughout the acquisition process. The Federal Acquisition Regulation (FAR) encourages early exchanges of information with industry among all interested parties and can occur at any time between the identification of a requirement through the receipt of proposals. These exchanges can improve both the Government's understanding of industry capabilities and the industry's understanding of the Government's needs. Applicable FAR Overhaul (RFO) and FAR Companion (FC) references include, but are not limited to, the following:

- [RFO FAR Subpart 1.1/FC 1](#): Establishes guiding principles to ensure an acquisition system that operates with integrity, fairness, and openness; encourages responsible and constructive engagements with vendors throughout the acquisition lifecycle; and considers the views of governmental and non-governmental parties through formal rulemaking processes when developing acquisition policies.
- [RFO FAR Part 5/FC 5](#): Mandates agencies publicize key acquisition actions —such as pre-solicitation notices, solicitations, and award announcements—through the Governmentwide Point of Entry (GPE) and other appropriate channels to promote transparency, consistency, and competition.
- [RFO FAR 10.001/FC 10](#): Compels agencies to conduct market research, which may involve proactive communication with industry through Requests for Information (RFIs), one-on-one engagement, online forums, and other interactive methods.
- [RFO FAR 14.209/FC 14.3](#): Requires transparency in sealed bidding through well-defined requirements, pre-bid conferences, amendments, and notifications to ensure fairness and promote competition.
- [RFO FAR Part 15/FC15.1](#): Advances industry exchanges through industry conferences, oral presentations, pre-award notices, debriefings, clarifications and negotiations.
- [RFO FAR 16.507](#): Addresses indefinite-delivery contract ordering procedures and encourages communication with vendors that promotes fair opportunities for all prospective vendors.
- [RFO FAR 19.202](#): Encourages communication with small businesses to ensure they understand how to do business with the Government and awareness of potential acquisition opportunities.
- [RFO FAR 33.104-4\(a\)](#): Establishes procedures that foster constructive discussions to mitigate and resolve protests.
- [RFO FAR 36.301/FC 36.3](#): Highlights the importance of communication between the Government and vendors for construction and architect-engineer contracts to ensure mutual understanding of project requirements and industry capabilities.
- [RFO FAR 42.302\(a\)/FC 42.3](#): Outlines contract administration responsibilities, including maintaining communication with vendors to monitor and ensure compliance with contract terms and conditions.

By encouraging communication with vendors, the FAR aims to improve acquisition outcomes, foster innovation, enhance competition, and ensure the government acquires goods and services that best meet its needs. Ultimately, USDA understands that meaningful vendor communication and outreach helps identify more qualified sources and solutions, delivering greater value to both the agency and the taxpayer.

The USDA Vendor Communication Plan (VCP) reflects the most current strategies for USDA engagement with vendors. This includes guidance from the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), Office of Federal Procurement Policy (OFPP) memorandum titled "[Myth Busting #4 – Strengthening Engagement with Industry Partners through Innovative Business Practices](#)", dated April 30, 2019. The purpose of OMB's memo is to raise awareness of vendor engagement strategies within the acquisition sector, foster a more responsive buying process, modernize acquisition practices, and deliver greater value to the taxpayer.

This plan outlines how USDA has reduced—and will continue to reduce—unnecessary barriers to vendor engagement, publicize communication opportunities, and prioritize engagement opportunities for high impact acquisitions. These opportunities include outreach to vendors, such as small businesses and those that have not previously worked with USDA. USDA remains committed to the principles of openness, fairness, and transparency in the acquisition process while safeguarding non-public information.

The VCP is designed to enhance communication and engagement with vendors, maintain a healthy, balanced supply chain, and promote efficient, effective operations while reinforcing public trust. We are pleased to share this updated VCP with stakeholders both inside and outside the USDA.

2. Statement of Agency Commitment

USDA's vision is to provide an equitable and climate-smart food and agriculture economy that protects and enhances the health, nutrition, and quality of life of all Americans; sustains healthy land, forests, and clean water; helps rural America thrive; and feeds the world.

Enhanced communication between Government and vendors is vital to clearly define requirements within the market environment, realistically assess and assign risk, and establish cost, schedule, and performance expectations to ensure successful contract management.

The FAR authorizes a broad range of options for vendor communication throughout the acquisition process. However, awareness of these options is often limited to a relatively small group of acquisition offices. USDA is committed to engaging the broader acquisition community—including program managers and executives—to increase awareness of available avenues for vendor engagement.

By increasing awareness and participation, USDA aims to optimize interactions between the acquisition workforce and vendors, ensuring the best use of time and resources while strengthening partnerships that deliver value to the public. Effective communication and collaboration with vendors are key components to USDA's success. To achieve this, USDA is committed to the following actions:

- Communicate early, frequently, and constructively with vendors in the conduct of fair and open business opportunities;
- Include small businesses and subgroups of small businesses in communications with vendors;
- Engage vendors that USDA has not previously worked with; and
- Protect non-public information, including vendors' confidential information and USDA's source selection information.

a) Innovative Technology Solutions

USDA encourages using innovative technological solutions to effectively tap the understanding of vendors during pre-solicitation phases, such as market research. USDA's acquisition workforce can access new and emerging innovative techniques through the [Procurement Innovation Effort \(PIE\) | USDA \(SharePoint\)](#). Additional federal guidance for leveraging technology includes:

- Opportunity searches at [SAM.gov](#)
- Training federal staff via the Virtual Procurement Innovation Lab (PIL) Boot Camp, available in the [FAI/DAU CSOD](#) System.
 - To register: Log into CSOD → click *Learning* → *Learning Search* → enter FCL-A-9053

b) Promoting Competition

USDA prioritizes engagement opportunities for high-risk, complex programs or those that fail to attract new vendors during competition. The Secretary of Agriculture is focused on promoting

competition, limiting single-source opportunities, and increasing market research to deliver the most valued solutions for USDA's mission.

USDA's Competition Advocates serve to support the duties outlined in [41. U.S.C. §1705](#), including promoting and challenging barriers to full and open competition. USDA's Competition Advocates may be contacted through the [Mission Areas and Agency Procurement Organizations | USDA](#).

c) Annual Mission Area Review

USDA conducts an annual Mission Area review, where each Chief of Contracting Office (COCO) provides updates to the Senior Procurement Executive (SPE). This review highlights the status of major programs, IT acquisition, innovation, industry partnerships, etc.

d) USDA Vendor Communication Plan Page

USDA's commitment to these goals will improve the quality, timeliness, and cost-effectiveness of products and services acquired to fulfill the agency's mission. This Plan will be updated as needed, and we encourage agency staff, vendors, and stakeholders to visit the [Office of Contracting and Procurement \(OCP\) Policies & Regulations | USDA](#). Additionally, USDA's [Contracting With USDA | USDA](#) provides helpful information to assist interested vendors.

3. Senior Agency Officials Responsible for Promoting Vendor Engagement

The Department of Agriculture Chief Acquisition Officer (CAO) holds overall responsibility for promoting USDA's vendor engagement activities. In addition, the SPE, Head of the Contracting Activity (HCA), COCOS, Office of Small and Disadvantaged Business Utilization (OSDBU), and Competition Advocates share responsibility for ensuring the VCP is effectively implemented.

Each USDA contracting activity manages vendor communication with input and assistance from its Small Business Specialists and Competition Advocates. Other key stakeholders with roles in carrying out the plan include:

- Program Offices
- Contracting Officer's Representatives (COR)
- Contracting Officers (CO)
- Contract Specialists
- Other agency officials involved in acquisition activities

4. Agency Innovation in Action

Acquisition Innovation Advocate and Industry Liaison

a) Acquisition Innovation Advocate

In March 2016, OMB requested that agencies appoint Acquisition Innovation Advocates (AIAs) and set up Acquisition Innovation Labs (AILs) to help agencies achieve better results for each taxpayer dollar through better and smarter execution of emerging and well-established acquisition practices.

AIAs make up the AIA Council which consists of advocates from each agency subject to the CFO Act of 1990, as well as an advocate from the Small Agency Council. The council is tasked with meeting regularly to broaden awareness and foster cross-agency collaboration and innovation. AIAs provide their workforce with a clear pathway to test and document new acquisition practices and facilitate fresh perspectives on existing practices.

USDA's SPE has identified two AIA from OCP —covering Policy and Operations—will drive

acquisition innovation by promoting the FAR Overhaul, testing Strategic Acquisition Guidance, and initiatives including training, job aids, and progress reporting.

b) Industry Liaison

To keep up with the rapidly accelerating pace of technological change, a number of agencies have sought better ways to communicate with vendors so they can better understand the commercial marketplace, attract new vendors, and encourage current partners to use new processes and develop, test, and offer more modern solutions. Despite this progress, the pace of adoption has been limited relative to the total volume of activity that potentially could benefit from these efforts; only a fraction of our transactions is using these new ways of doing business. For this reason, OFPP requires agencies to publicly designate an Industry Liaison (IL) to serve as a conduit among acquisition stakeholders and promote strong agency vendor communication practices. USDA's IL may be reached at Procurement.Policy@usda.gov.

5. Streamlining Acquisitions through Procurement Innovation

Streamlining acquisitions allows vendors easier access to requirements, can reduce bid and proposal costs, and can result in a reduction in acquisition lead time. USDA officially launched PIE in January 2020 focusing on educating acquisition professionals on flexibilities available in the FAR as well as streamlining procurement activities to reach the right sets of competitive vendors. USDA encourages use of techniques found on the [Periodic Table of Acquisition Innovations](#).

Examples of streamlining acquisitions include the following:

- **Purchase Cards** - Government purchase cards are used for low-dollar value transactions, allowing agencies to buy goods and services quickly without the need for a formal acquisition process. This method is particularly effective for micro-purchases (i.e., \$15,000).
- **Blanket Purchase Agreements (BPAs)** - BPAs establish pre-negotiated agreements with vendors for recurring needs. They streamline the ordering process by allowing agencies to place orders against the agreement without having to negotiate terms and conditions each time.
- **Indefinite Delivery/Indefinite Quantity (IDIQ) Contracts** - IDIQ contracts allow agencies to place orders for supplies and services as needed over a specified period. This eliminates the need for multiple solicitations and awards, speeding up the acquisition process.
- **Government-Wide Acquisition Contracts (GWACs)** - GWACs are multi-agency contracts for IT solutions. They offer pre-competeted contracts that agencies can use to acquire technology solutions quickly, bypassing lengthy acquisition processes.
- **Oral Solicitations** - In urgent situations, agencies can use oral solicitations instead of written ones, significantly reducing the time required to gather quotes and make awards.
- **Reverse Industry Days**
Inviting vendors to share insights with acquisition teams early in the process encourages innovative solutions, sharper requirements, smoother alignment, and fewer clarifications
- **Industry Days**
Hosted by an agency to engage with potential vendors before releasing a formal solicitation to inform vendors about the upcoming acquisition, objectives, and requirements; encourage competition by reaching a broad vendor base; gather input from industry to refine requirements and identify innovative solutions; and clarify expectations regarding timelines, evaluation criteria, and contract structure to improve quality of responses.
- **Facilitated Requirements Development Workshops**
Bringing together stakeholders (with a neutral facilitator) to define clear objectives, performance outcomes, and acquisition strategies upfront—accelerates requirement clarity and compresses development timelines.

- **One-on-One Market Engagements**

Conducting private meetings between acquisition teams and vendors before the solicitation increases mutual understanding of requirements, processes, and capabilities—reducing misinterpretations and bid revisions.

- **Remote Acquisition Activities**

Utilizing virtual tools—like online conferences, phone interviews, virtual site visits, video proposal presentations, and consensus evaluations—reduces travel, speeds communications, and supports diverse vendor participation.

By adopting these techniques—ranging from affordability transparency to virtual acquisition formats—USDA helps ensure vendors better understand requirements, submit more accurate proposals, and support faster procurement outcomes.

6. Efforts to Reduce Barriers and Promote Engagement

USDA will engage in the following activities, as appropriate, to reduce barriers and promote vendor engagement:

a) Transparency

Transparency in USDA's acquisition process serves to inform our vendor partners, including those who have yet to engage in USDA business, about current and emerging needs. Information is publicly available on the following sites:

- Information regarding USDA acquisitions is published through [USA Spending.gov](#).
- Acquisition opportunities and requests for information related to acquisition requirements are posted on the interactive [SAM.gov](#).
- USDA publishes an annual forecast of planned acquisitions on its [Forecast of Business Opportunities | USDA](#).
- Information on how to do business with USDA is published on the [Business Opportunities | USDA](#) and at [Contracting with USDA | USDA](#).
- Vendor capability portal

The USDA posts and regularly updates vendor engagement events at [Upcoming Events | USDA](#). Posted events will include small business connection events, paths to prosperity, etc.

b) Publicize Vendor Communication

- Distribute VCP and OFPP - Myth-Busting memorandums to all stakeholders:
 - [Myth Busting #4 – Strengthening Engagement with Industry Partners through Innovative Business Practices](#)
 - [Myth-Busting #3 - Further Improving Industry Communication with Effective Debriefings](#)
 - [Myth-Busting #2 - Addressing Misconceptions and Further Improving Communication During the Acquisition Process](#)
 - [Myth-Busting – Addressing Misconceptions to Improve Communication with Industry during the Acquisition Process](#)
- Incorporate VCP in acquisition workforce on-boarding and training
- Post VCP on agency and office websites
- Promote VCP at vendor outreach sessions
- Require COs to address vendor communications in acquisition plans

- Post draft statements of work on Contract Opportunities (sam.gov)/e-buy for vendors to comment
- Promote use of vendor communication to conduct market research, including draft solicitations
- Make use of oral presentations when applicable
- Publicize vendor engagement events at [Upcoming Events | USDA](#)
- Promote and conduct small business outreach meetings
- Ensure vendor community is given adequate time to provide comments on draft solicitation documents, submit questions, and receive responses to help prepare and submit proposals
- Plan pre-proposal conferences and site visits where appropriate for complex/significant acquisitions

c) Protection of Non-Public Information

USDA is committed to protect non-public information, including vendor's confidential information and the Agency's source selection information. Two statutory principles limit Government communications with vendors in the acquisition cycle: 1) Preventing unfair competitive advantage through selective release of source selection information and 2) Preventing competitive harm to a vendor through release of its proprietary information. USDA takes these obligations seriously and will use all available means to protect non-public information from unauthorized disclosure.

d) Small and Emerging Business Outreach

Small businesses drive innovation throughout the economy. USDA recognizes this and has implemented an aggressive small business outreach program to bring new and emerging businesses to the table with USDA. USDA's OSDBU sponsors a series of Small Business Vendor community outreach sessions throughout the year. The purpose of these sessions is to provide the small business community the opportunity to meet with Specialists from OSDBU and USDA acquisition offices to discuss their capabilities and learn of potential acquisition opportunities.

Agency Specialists, in coordination with OSDBU, are responsible for carrying out the small business program in their respective agencies. The [OSDBU | USDA](#) also provides information on doing business with USDA, forecast of business opportunities, three different types of outreach events, a subcontracting directory, and a directory of [Small Business Specialists | USDA](#). A list of OSDBU contacts is available at [OSDBU Staff Contact List | USDA](#).

e) Category Management

Category Management is an integral part of an agency's overall acquisition planning lifecycle and USDA recognizes the opportunity for leveraging available data to help remove barriers to competition, specifically surrounding other than full and open competition. USDA utilizes Category Management data to not only review buying patterns, but to collect like requirements and survey the vendor marketplace to identify better overall solutions for USDA. Part of the data analysis includes looking at actions conducted with limited or no competition and validating mission requirements to promote competition.

f) Stakeholders Engagement

USDA regularly consults and engages with a wide range of diverse stakeholders, including Congress; USDA's customers; State, local, and Tribal governments producers, cooperators, landowners, policy experts, universities and trade schools, infrastructure sectors, lenders, foundations, technical assistance providers, environmental and social advocates, industry partners, and consumer groups regarding our programs' effectiveness. USDA's Mission Areas and Agencies conduct a variety of stakeholder engagement activities, including posting RFIs on the Federal Register and holding listening sessions

with different Departmental partners. USDA also supports the [Acquisition 360](#) initiative to obtain stakeholder feedback as described in the [FC 1.000](#). These activities have been used to inform and validate USDA's strategic goals, objectives, and performance measures.

7. Partnering with Industry for Requirement Development and Pre-Solicitation Activities

USDA procurement guidance outlines specific parameters for when formal acquisition plans are required which are referenced in part 407 of the [USDA Overhauled Agriculture Acquisition Regulation](#) (AGAR). Although formal acquisition plans are not required for all acquisitions, USDA is focusing on earlier engagement with vendors. Earlier and more frequent engagement with vendors on overly restrictive requirements and better acquisition methods creates better mission outcomes. Talking to vendors aids in reducing assumptions and uncertainty while allowing Government acquisition staff to gather information on vendor solutions. This gives the Government access to more common commercial solutions which can increase competition overall.

8. Publication of Engagement Events

USDA will post and regularly update vendor engagement events at [Upcoming Events | USDA](#) Government-wide point of entry contract opportunities located on and other Government contract platforms. Posted events may include, but are not limited to, industry days, small business outreach sessions, pre-solicitation conferences, solicitation Q&A sessions, etc.

9. Roles and Responsibilities

a) Chief Acquisition Officer (CAO)

Role assigned to the Assistant Secretary to the Secretary of Agriculture responsible for all departmental administrative activities, including acquisitions and overseeing vendor engagement.

b) Senior Procurement Executive (SPE)

Senior agency official responsible for promoting vendor engagement, accountable for overall efforts to improve engagement with businesses, and increasing awareness of vendor communication needs.

c) Head of the Contracting Activity (HCA)

Responsible for overseeing and managing agency acquisition activities and ensuring that related processes align with federal regulations and agency policies. This includes overseeing effective vendor engagement to ensure the agency procures high-quality goods and services efficiently and in a manner that supports USDA's mission and objectives.

d) Chiefs of Contracting Offices (COCO)

Senior agency officials responsible for promoting vendor engagement in the acquisition activities, accountable for promoting vendor engagement and adherence to this plan within their respective activities.

e) Contracting Officer (CO)

For each appropriate acquisition:

- Establish the timing, frequency, and degree of vendor engagement necessary to appropriately develop requirements, acquisition strategy, and performance metrics. Recommend appropriate means of communication (i.e., one-on-one meetings, vendor days, draft solicitations, teleconferences, or a combination of these methods).
 - Consider methods that generate new vendors to the market to increase competition.

- Work with the OSDBU and Small Business Specialists to identify the best ways to reach out to small businesses.
- Use the Small Business Central Event Listing on sam.gov/.
- Collaborate with the OSDBU (as appropriate), Program/Project Managers and CORs to determine who will conduct vendor engagement efforts and how these sessions will be conducted.
- Encourage the PM and COR to communicate appropriately for pre-solicitation efforts.
- Be the focal point for vendor communication after the solicitation is issued.
- Be as knowledgeable as possible about the content of the procurement forecast.

f) Program/Project Officer (PM) and Contracting Officer's Representative (COR)

- Submit planned procurements to the USDA Procurement Forecast as early as possible, and up to three years before the need date, to provide vendors with advance notice of USDA requirements. Be as knowledgeable as possible about the content of the procurement forecast.
- As soon as a need is identified, inform the CO about the level of vendor engagement needed to help the PM and others conduct effective market research.
- If market research does not identify sufficient competition, work with Contract Specialist and/or Small Business Specialist to identify strategies to increase engagement.
- Assess the need for introducing new entrants to the market and recommend to the CO ways to do this.
- Discuss vendor engagement meetings with the CO prior to the meetings - the CO is not required to attend but should be aware of all communications.

g) OSDBU and Small Business Specialists

- Promote overall efforts to improve engagement with small businesses and increase Department-wide awareness of the need to communicate with vendors.
- Coordinate vendor engagement activities with program and acquisition teams .
- Coordinate and collaborate with interagency colleagues and the vendor community regarding vendor engagement activities with the OSDBU and acquisition teams.
- Serve as the Department's primary contact for engaging prospective small businesses.
- Collaborate with the CO and the contract specialist to ensure a clear understanding by the acquisition team of the contents and importance of USDA's procurement forecast.
- Publicize outreach and training opportunities using a variety of vehicles including the Upcoming Events | USDA page.
- Lead the effort to assess the need for introducing new vendors to the market and recommend to the CO ways to do this.
- Lead the effort to conduct market research to identify small businesses capable of meeting USDA's needs.

h) Small Business Specialists (In contracting activities)

- Assist acquisition teams in developing and executing vendor engagement strategies.
- Coordinate vendor engagement activities with acquisition teams.
- Assess need for introducing new vendors to the market and recommend to the CO ways to do this.
- Conduct market research to identify small businesses capable of meeting the Department's

needs. Assist the CO and PM to encourage setting aside acquisitions for small businesses.

i) Agency and Contracting Activity Competition Advocate

- Promote the acquisition of commercial products and commercial services; full and open competition; challenge requirements that are not stated in terms of functions to be performed, performance required or essential physical characteristics; and challenge barriers to the acquisition of commercial items and full and open competition such as unnecessarily restrictive statements of work, unnecessarily detailed specifications, and unnecessarily burdensome contract clauses.
- Promote competition - Encourage industry outreach for sole source procurements.

10. Training and Awareness Efforts for USDA Employees

a) Defense Acquisition University Courses

- ACQ 315: Understanding Industry
- CLM 005: Industry Proposals and Communication

b) Federal Training Courses

- FCL-A-0021 (CL): To Bid or Not to Bid: Industry Perspective
- FCL-A-0027 (CL): Can We Talk: Industry Day Conferences
- [FAI Vendor Related Courses](#)

11. Links to Existing Policies

a) Federal Acquisition Regulations

- Revolutionary FAR Overhaul (RFO) FAR
 - <https://www.acquisition.gov/far-overhaul/far-part-deviation-guide>
- FAR Companion
 - https://www.acquisition.gov/sites/default/files/page_file_uploads/far-companion.pdf

b) USDA Acquisition Regulations & Guidance

- USDA Procurement – Policy & Regulations
 - <https://www.usda.gov/da/ocp/ppd/policies-regulations>

c) Statutory & Regulatory Requirements

- Procurement Integrity Act ([41 U.S.C. § 423 / RFO FAR 3.104](#)) - Prohibits government officials and contractors from disclosing or obtaining bid, proposal, or source selection information before award to ensure fairness and integrity in the procurement process.
- Freedom of Information Act ([5 U.S.C. § 552 / RFO FAR Subpart 24.2](#)) - Requires federal agencies to disclose records upon request unless protected by specific exemptions, ensuring transparency and public access to government information.
- Conflict of Interest Prohibition (18 U.S.C. § 208) - prohibits federal employees from participating personally and substantially in any government matter that would affect their own financial interests or those of certain related parties.
- Competition in Contracting Act (CICA) (10 U.S.C. § 2304) - Government officials may not give unauthorized preferential treatment to one firm but must treat all firms equally
- Trade Secrets Act (18 U.S.C. § 1905) - Government officials may not disclose trade secrets or

other proprietary information without permission of the owner of the information. Government officials must protect procurement-sensitive information and information that would not otherwise be lawfully disclosed to the public under the Freedom of Information Act.

<https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/18/1905>

- Federal Advisory Committee Act (5 U.S.C. Appendix 2, § 5) - Government officials must comply with the Federal Advisory Committee Act when seeking advice or recommendations from a group that includes non-Government employees to ensure that the Government is not inappropriately influenced by a special interest.

<https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/5a/compiledact-92-463/section-5>

USDA has established a centralized repository for Mission Areas to post and share best practices and lessons learned. This resource is available through the [USDA Acquisition Workforce - Shared with Us \(SharePoint\)](#) and is accessible exclusively to USDA employees.