



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
"The People's Department – Every Day, Every Way"

CUSTOMER SERVICE PLAN

NOVEMBER 7, 2011





LETTER FROM THE SECRETARY

When President Abraham Lincoln founded the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) he referred to it as “The People’s Department” because of its ability to impact the lives of Americans in so many ways. One hundred and fifty years later, USDA is proud to continue President Lincoln’s legacy and serve all Americans.

The programs administered by USDA serve millions of customers each year. Just a few examples of their breadth and impact include:

- USDA inspects over 60 billion pounds of processed food products annually and works 24 hours a day to defend America’s animal and plant resources from agricultural pests and diseases, ensuring Americans access to a safe, plentiful, and nutritious food supply.
- Each year 170 million visitors reconnect with our great outdoors by visiting the National Forests and Grasslands managed by USDA’s Forest Service (USFS).
- Our Food and Nutrition Service’s (FNS) nutrition programs serve 1 in 4 Americans in the course of a year. This year, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) provided assistance to over 45 million people. The National School Lunch program works with 101,000 schools and childcare institutions to serve nutritionally-balanced meals to over 31 million children each school day.
- The Farm Service Agency (FSA) offers support to the more than 2 million farmers and ranchers that provide food, fiber, and energy for the nation through 2,244 offices, and in close partnership with our Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and Rural Development (RD) agencies.



During my time as Secretary, modernizing USDA and ensuring that we provide first-class customer service to all has been a priority. From our Cultural Transformation and Strengthening Service initiatives and our increased use of plain language to the steps we have taken to create a culture of continuous process improvement and the landmark Civil Rights Assessment completed this year, USDA has strengthened its focus on understanding and meeting America’s needs.

With the many challenges our Nation faces today, it is more important than ever that we continue to invest in innovative solutions that will further improve the service we provide. This Customer Service Plan highlights just some of the many investments, particularly in new technologies, that our programs are making to improve the customer experience.

We recognize that these changes will take time and may reveal new issues to address. I assure you that USDA is committed to providing the best customer service anywhere. If you have ideas for how we can do better, I encourage you to please share them with the USDA staff you work with.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Thomas J. Vilsack".

Thomas J. Vilsack
Secretary





EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

USDA is committed to providing first-class service to all customers and potential customers. Each day our 110,000 employees spread across 3,000 offices work to improve the Nation's economy and quality of life, touching the lives of almost every American.

Because producing America's food and fiber is a global, technologically-advanced, rapidly diversifying, and highly competitive business, USDA is constantly looking for ways to better support our farmers, ranchers, and many others that help bring quality products from our fields to our tables and homes. And because our rural communities – home to 60 million Americans, including a majority of the men and women that feed our families and protect our nation – face many unique challenges, it is essential that we remain committed to improving the quality of our service, taking every opportunity to become increasingly competent, efficient, and responsive.

Meeting these goals requires that we not only look forward to emerging challenges, but also periodically perform retrospective analyses of what we have put in place in the past. Even the most rigorous pre-rulemaking analysis cannot anticipate every consequence that a rule will have, and it is impossible to anticipate every change that will come with time. In developing our regulatory review plan this year our first criterion was improving customer service. The result was that we were able to identify opportunities to optimize our efficiency, such as changes to the operational aspects of the Rural Development Water and Waste Loans and Grants Program that will save customers a combined 131,000 hours a year once implemented. Our Food Safety Inspection Service is working to update the approval process for meat and poultry product labels, allowing for greater use of generically-approved labels that will help businesses speed new products to market and save them a combined 73,000 hours a year.

We are dedicated to listening closely to our customers that we serve and upgrading our business practices and technological systems to better meet their needs and expectations across the United States and the world. We also recognize that improving our interactions with customers starts first within the Department. Internally, we are working to strengthen the service we provide to our programs and employees across common administrative services such as human resources, IT, procurement, finance and budgeting, and civil rights. These improvements will allow more efficient and consistent business practices across the Department and ultimately enhance the ability of our public servants to better administer the quality services they provide to our external customers.

Though we have long had the goal of providing service to all, we know USDA has not always lived up to that ideal. That is why from the day Secretary Vilsack took office he has made it a priority to ensure that all eligible Americans receive equal access to our programs. The independent civil rights assessment published earlier this year provides a roadmap that will help us continue to move forward in this effort. The hundreds of recommendations from that report will further improve the experience for all of our customers as they are implemented in the coming years.

As required by Executive Order 13571 on Streamlining Service Delivery and Improving Customer Service, the USDA Customer Service Plan identifies key actions and initiatives aimed at improving the customer experience, modernizing and streamlining processes, reducing costs, accelerating delivery, and using innovative technology to advance customer service. This is just a sample of what USDA is doing to improve our service. If you have additional ideas for the programs spotlighted below, or any others, we encourage you to share them with us.





CONSERVATION DELIVERY STREAMLINING INITIATIVE *(Signature Initiative)*

Natural Resources Conservation Service

Overview: The Conservation Delivery Streamlining Initiative seeks to deliver technical and financial assistance programs through a simplified process for customers to better help people help the land.

Key Customers: The land owners that partner with NRCS for over 2.3 million conservation plans.

Challenges: Conservationists often report spending as little as 20 to 35 percent of their time in the field working with customers due to the current business model and processes.

PROGRAM INFORMATION AND SIGNUP FOR FARMERS AND RANCHERS

Farm Service Agency

Overview: FSA makes a million program payments and provides 35,000 loans to farm families annually.

Key Customers: America's 2.2 million farms.

Challenges: Helping our 13,000 field staff – located in county offices across the United States – provide up-to-date information on programs to every potential customer. Leveraging technology while also accommodating producers with limited access to the internet, cultural barriers to participation, and a need to learn about complex new programs every few years.

RECREATION INFORMATION AND TRIP PLANNING

U.S. Forest Service

Overview: Annually 170 million visitors reconnect with our Great Outdoors through USFS recreation sites.

Key Customers: American and international visitors looking for information about recreation activities.

Challenges: Integrating new and updated technologies and self-service options to meet citizens changing expectations without disrupting the great service we currently provide.

SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

Food and Nutrition Service

Overview: SNAP helps eligible low-income families purchase food during tough economic times, freeing up family funds to pay for other necessities such as housing and utilities as families work toward self-sufficiency.

Key Customers: The 45 million Americans that receive benefits through our State partners.

Challenges: States face extraordinary challenges today in administering SNAP. The economic downturn has substantially increased demand for nutrition assistance, while at the same time reducing the resources available to States to administer the programs.

VETERINARY BIOLOGICS LICENSING

Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service

Overview: APHIS regulates veterinary biologics to ensure that the biologic products available for the diagnosis, prevention, and treatment of animal diseases are pure, safe, potent, and effective.

Key Customers: Companies that research, develop, and produce veterinary biologics.

Challenges: Long processing times reduce the biologics industry's ability to bring veterinary biologics products to market, costing companies millions each year and reducing animal owners' access to new and innovative tools for protecting their animals.



CONSERVATION DELIVERY STREAMLINING INITIATIVE

Signature Initiative

NATURAL RESOURCES CONSERVATION SERVICE

Overview: The Conservation Delivery Streamlining Initiative will deliver conservation assistance through a streamlined business model that fully integrates technical and financial assistance services, simplifies program delivery for both customers and staff, and is more effective at getting conservation practices in place on the ground.

Key Customer Groups: The Nations' land owners partner with NRCS to develop and implement over 2.3 million conservation plans, containing almost 43 million conservation practices.

Service Challenges: NRCS' current business model and processes overburden the field technical staff, and often leave inadequate time for on-site planning and technical assistance, the foundation for USDA's conservation programs. In addition, NRCS' information tools used by its field staff are often time-consuming and not integrated in a manner that helps planners to be efficient. Citing the combined effects of these and other issues, conservationists often report spending as little as 20 to 40 percent of their time in the field working with customers.

Expected Outcomes: Field staff will be able to spend up to 75 percent of their time in the field with customers. The timeliness of program delivery will be increased. A new business model that allows clients to work with NRCS 24/7, without requiring customers to make office visits.

Increase Feedback from Customers

- New approaches for interacting with clients will be implemented to enhance and customize NRCS's services to its growingly-diverse clientele. A web-based Client Gateway will allow program participants to apply for assistance; view plans and contracts; check eligibility, ask questions, digitally sign documents; review upcoming work, and more at their convenience 24/7. This approach will be piloted at selected locations in early 2012.
- By implementing mobile technologies for its conservationists, NRCS will not only reduce the number of trips for NRCS between the office and the field, but will completely eliminate the need for customers to travel to NRCS offices.
- The conservation plan documents and other information products provided to customers is being simplified and redesigned to more effectively communicate with customers.



Adopt Best Practices for Improving Customer Experience

- To ensure field staff can focus their time on the Agency's core activities (conservation planning and applying practices), NRCS is streamlining its business model and redesigning its processes to simplify program delivery for both customers and staff, fully integrate technical and financial assistance services, and more effectively get conservation on the ground.
- On the technical side, NRCS' conservation planning framework for assessing on-site resource concerns is being redesigned to simplify planning and client decision-making, and ensure NRCS





plans are documented using a science-based approach.

- Enhancements to its technology will allow NRCS to better serve customers by integrating conservation effects into NRCS' planning tools, better describe environmental outcomes, streamline financial assistance program ranking, and support customers interested in environmental market programs.
- In addition, NRCS is working to standardize its financial assistance processes nationwide to ensure adequate financial management controls are in place, and make the delivery of financial assistance programs timelier. NRCS will reduce the need for the customers to request contract modifications through more comprehensive up-front planning with its customers and other process changes.
- Emerging technologies such as electronic signatures and alternative approaches for screening, ranking and funding program applications are also being piloted in 2011 and 2012 to streamline program delivery and simplify program participation for clients.

Set, Communicate, and Use Customer Service Metrics and Standards

- NRCS will enable technical field staffs to spend as much as 75 percent of their "conservation assistance" time in the field with customers to deliver planning, application, and financial support.
- Alternative financial assistance approaches and processes are being designed to reduce the administrative time between an application and a funding decision to a few weeks or less.
- NRCS will implement web-based technologies that allow its customers to apply for programs, view and sign plans and contracts, check on payments, and much more at their convenience 24/7, without requiring a scheduled appointment and with no trips to the office.
- NRCS' new processes and technologies implemented through the Streamlining Initiative will free up the equivalent of an additional 1200 to 1500 field technical staff that will be redirected back into working directly with customers in the field.

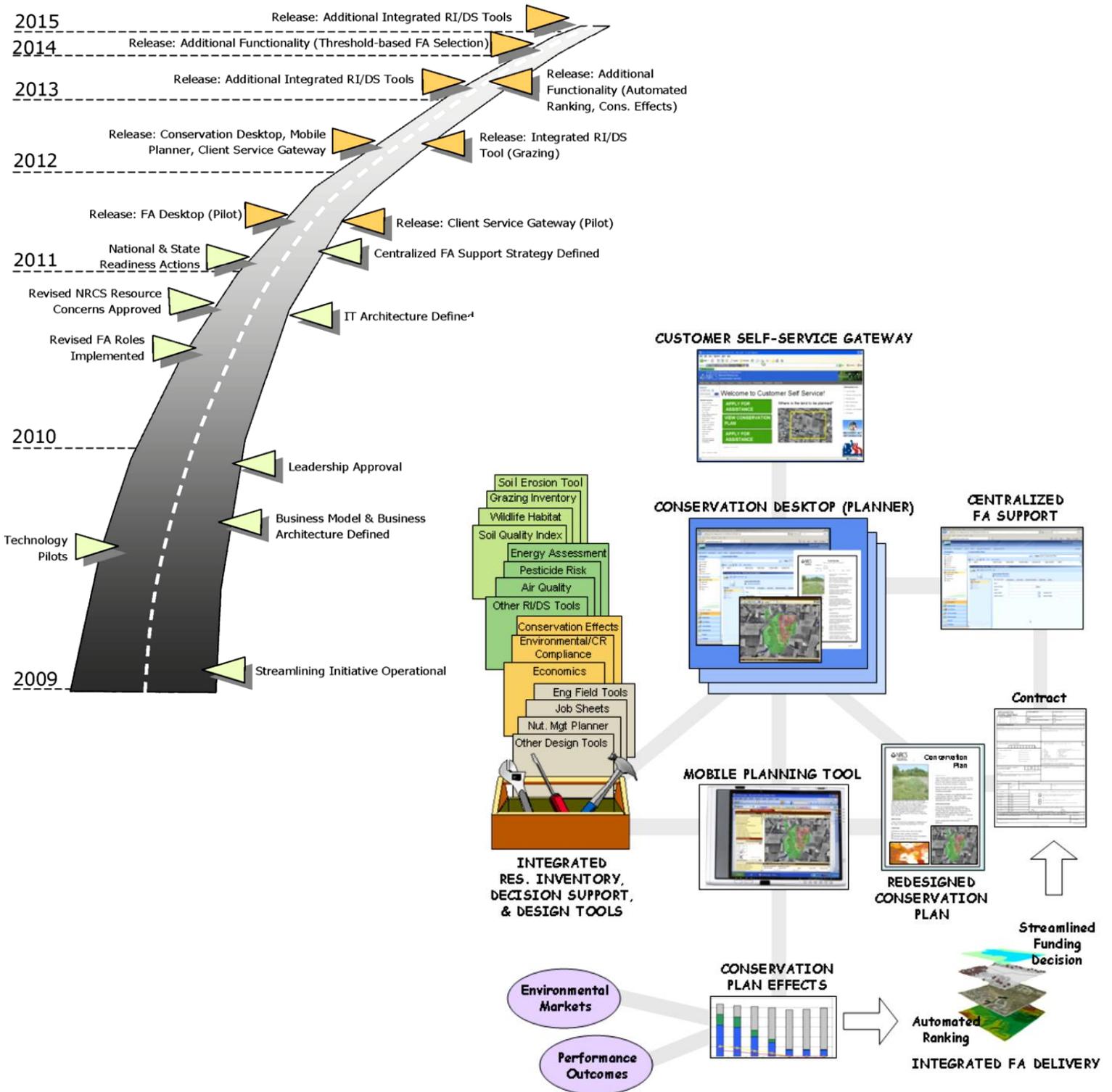
Streamline Agency Tools and Processes to Reduce Costs and Accelerate Delivery

- Through the Conservation Delivery Streamlining Initiative, NRCS is implementing new technologies that will minimize duplicate data entry, facilitate automated workflow, reduce training needs and costs, and eliminate duplicate functionality in NRCS' tools. This directly impacts customer service by reducing the paperwork required by both customers and staff, minimizing time spent on administrative tasks, and eliminating delays in getting plans completed and contracts signed.
- By integrating geospatial data, environmental models, and mobile technologies into its tools, NRCS will better serve its customers by enhancing the data available for sound decision-making, describing the outcomes from implementing alternative practices, and providing information to support environmental market opportunities.
- NRCS' new tools are also being designed to support the client's use of external technical service providers, which will provide customers more flexibility in working with USDA conservation programs and in some cases, the opportunity to acquire even more timely service.



CONSERVATION DELIVERY STREAMLINING INITIATIVE

Signature Initiative Roadmap





PROGRAM INFORMATION & SIGNUP FOR FARMERS & RANCHERS

FARM SERVICE AGENCY

Overview: The Farm Service Agency makes more than a million program payments to farmers and ranchers each year on a wide variety of USDA programs – including price support, commodity, disaster assistance and conservation initiatives – as well as farm loans to more than 35,000 farm families. The programs are delivered by thousands of staff in county offices nationwide, who are also responsible for keeping producers informed of program changes and opportunities. FSA has undertaken a variety of initiatives to get payments to producers more efficiently, and also to better educate farmers regarding what’s available.

Key Customer Groups: American farmers and ranchers; Farm Service Agency employees.

Challenges: At FSA, we strive to meet the demands of our growing society and changing technologies in the face of a tough economic climate. In the past, lengthy and demanding loan applications and regulations, and, at times, the inconvenience of accessing an FSA office or Loan Officer for assistance has posed challenges to many producers across our vast Nation. By utilizing available technologies, streamlining applications processes, and modernizing our office outreach and communication, FSA aims to better serve our producers

Increase Feedback from Customers

- **Increased Work with Stakeholders:** FSA’s Office of Outreach is working with Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) to get the word out to farmers and ranchers regarding programs, particularly in economically distressed communities. FSA works closely with CBOs and the Office of Outreach to hold meetings in economically distressed communities to inform residents about FSA and the programs it offers.
- **Electronic Mailings:** FSA is incorporating the use of electronic mailings to communicate with its customers and potential customers. Electronic mailings allow subscribers to get the information they desire via emails, RSS, or SMS text. It also allows subscribers to manage their subscriptions so that they can receive only the information they desire. Of course, FSA will continue to provide information the traditional way for those customers and potential customers that have connectivity concerns.
- **AskFSA:** The agency established AskFSA, an online tool that allows customers to ask questions and get answers from FSA experts. In 2011, more than 1,000 questions have been posed to the agency using this tool, and more than 99% of site visitors are able to find answers to their questions on their own.
- **Translation:** FSA is planning on partnering with other Agencies to identify resources to assist our customers that require translation services. Additionally, the Agency will investigate the use of translator services within budget constraints when USDA resources are not available.
- **Web Site Updates:** FSA is working on updating its website. The agency has recently added a “Stay Connected” box to its website which allows customers to enter their email addresses to receive updates via electronic publications.





- Social Media Interaction: FSA has also increased its social media, through use of social media tools such as Twitter and YouTube. FSA has also established a Spanish-language Twitter account, which will allow it to better target information regarding its programs and processes to Spanish-speaking individuals and communities. While recognizing that social media is not a replacement for in-person information, these initiatives have provided another way for FSA to interact with a growing base of technology saavy customers. For example, by October 2011 more than 7,800 individuals were following FSA on Twitter.

Set, Communicate, and Use Customer Service Metrics and Standards

- Modernize and Innovate the Delivery of Agricultural Programs (MIDAS): FSA field offices currently use some of the oldest IT systems in the Federal government. The MIDAS initiative aims to combine updated hardware with better business practices, ultimately achieving faster and better service to producers, even in the face of budget reductions.
- Reducing the Paper Burden on Producers: FSA implemented new measures and handbooks that substantially streamlined processes and reduced paperwork, complexity, and duplication in farm program delivery. This initiative eliminated 230 forms and reduced regulations and procedures by 2000 pages.
- Streamlining Farm Loan Applications: FSA is currently developing a more streamlined loan process for repeat customers, and an abbreviated process for micro loans. FSA plans to publish proposals for these initiatives by the end of 2011.
- Acreage Crop Reporting Streamlining: FSA is working closely with the Risk Management Agency, Natural Resources Conservation Service, and National Agricultural Statistics Service in the process of establishing the Acreage Crop Reporting and Streamlining Initiative (ACRSI). The goal of the initiative is to simplify reporting processes, dates, and data definitions across USDA for farmers and ranchers, eliminating duplicative reports that they currently have to file to participate in programs.
- Better Explanations for Denial: FSA loan handbooks now require for denied loan applicants to be provided with an explanation for the decision and counseling on potential actions to overcome the bases for denial. This enables FSA Farm Loans management to track denied loans more closely and proactively manage field staff to improve customer communications. To improve FSA employees' skills in communicating adverse decisions, Farm Programs and Farm Loan Programs have jointly developed an interactive, web-based training course.





RECREATION INFORMATION & TRIP PLANNING

U.S. FOREST SERVICE

Overview: The Forest Service (USFS) provides recreation opportunities to a diverse group of people from rural and urban areas. The National Forest System hosts over 170 million visits each year. Interactive web-based services offer efficient new ways to reach potential visitors and assist them in making outdoor recreation choices.

Forest Service recreation site reservations are made through *Recreation.gov*. Information about recreation opportunities on Federal lands is displayed based on the customer's interests. *Recreation.gov* is provided under the National Recreation Reservation Service (NRRS), a Federal interagency program that delivers recreation reservation services for participating partner agencies under a contract administered by USFS. NRRS and *Recreation.gov* provide services for people to discover the parks, forests, lakes, museums, and other Federally-managed recreation sites in their area.

Key Customer Groups: American and international visitors looking for information about USFS- and other Federally-managed recreation sites and activities.

Challenges: Integrating new and updated technologies and self-service options to meet citizens changing expectations without disrupting the great service we currently provide.

Increase Feedback from Customers

- *Recreation.gov* will begin a new contracting phase in 2013 with delivery in 2016. The new system will include enhancing the existing customer feedback systems (telephone, e-mail, and mail).

Adopt Best Practices for Improving Customer Experience

- Recreation web portal for identifying recreation opportunities on the National Forests and Grasslands, allowing sorting by area and different types of outdoor activities.
- Interactive travel maps for the public to identify roads and areas for specific types of recreation activities on roads and trails.
- *Recreation.gov* will have updated technologies for trip planning in 2016, allowing the public greater access to trip planning tools to be used on line, reducing the time it presently takes for employees to provide the information in person at ranger stations and visitor centers.
- The recreation web portal and the interactive travel maps for roads and trails will reduce the reliance on supplying and distributing paper recreation maps to the public.



Set, Communicate, and Use Customer Service Metrics and Standards

- The current National Visitor Use Monitoring program includes a visitor satisfaction module. The module will be updated in 2013 to include user satisfaction feedback related to services received from the initial trip planning and reservations to the actual recreation experience. This will provide USFS with a near real-time capability to track detailed customer feedback metrics.





SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

FOOD AND NUTRITION SERVICE

Overview: SNAP provides food purchasing power to eligible low-income individuals and families during tough economic times, freeing up other family funds to pay for necessities as families work toward self-sufficiency.

Key Customer Groups: Our primary customer focus is on SNAP clients. Today, more than 45 million people participate in SNAP each month. While SNAP households are a diverse group, the data shows that the program is primarily utilized by working families, children, and the elderly.

However, SNAP is delivered through State human service agencies across the country. Therefore, working to improve the client experience also entails USDA improving its service to States as secondary customers.

Challenges: States face extraordinary challenges today in administering SNAP. The economic downturn has substantially increased demand for nutrition assistance, while at the same time reducing the resources available to States to administer the programs. Even with record SNAP caseloads, some States have been forced to implement staff layoffs or furloughs. USDA supports States in responding to these challenges, while ensuring they provide good customer service to clients and meet national standards for eligibility, benefit levels, and client rights.

Adopt Best Practices for Improving Customer Experience

- Our growing Ask the Expert online knowledge database on the SNAP web site offers self service and provides answers to frequently asked questions to members of the public.
- FNS continues to enhance its award winning SNAP Retailer Locator, an on-line tool that helps SNAP customers find stores that welcome SNAP benefits. This release added a Spanish version, as well as the ability to download data, and to obtain driving directions to SNAP authorized retail locations.
- Modernization Central, housed on the SNAP PartnerWeb intranet, is a new one stop location for information about modernization in SNAP for States, including information about business process reengineering, use of technology, policy options, and partnerships.



Streamline Agency Processes to Reduce Costs and Accelerate Delivery

- Our policy now allows States to use telephone interviews in lieu of face to face interviews for SNAP quality control purposes in households with allotments of \$100 or less and transitional benefit households providing States with a workload management tool in times of increasing participation.
- New proposed rules will give State agencies the option (without having to request a waiver), to use a phone interview instead of a face-to-face interview unless the latter is requested by a client; this provision streamlines administration and removes barriers to program participation. Currently, 40 States have a waiver of this provision for initial certification interviews.
- Another proposed rule change will give State agencies the option to determine compliance with the 20-hour minimum work requirement by averaging the number of hours worked over the month or using an 80-hour minimum monthly requirement, streamlining administration and removing barriers to program participation.





VETERINARY BIOLOGICS LICENSING

ANIMAL AND PLANT HEALTH INSPECTION SERVICE

Overview: APHIS regulates veterinary biologics to ensure that the biologic products available for the diagnosis, prevention, and treatment of animal diseases are pure, safe, potent, and effective.

Key Customer Groups: Biotechnology companies that develop and produce veterinary biologics.

Challenges: Long review and processing times reduce the biologics industry's ability to bring veterinary biologics products to market, costing companies millions each year and reducing animal owners' access to new and innovative biologics to protect and treat their animals.

Increase Feedback from Customers

- APHIS is developing a process to allow the biologics industry to provide a project development plan that would identify the steps they must complete to gain licensure. This effort will establish and maintain a level of predictability and transparency that will benefit the industry and USDA. APHIS and the industry also have the option to establish critical path agreements, which would document mutually agreed upon standards to apply to critical steps in the process.

Adopt Best Practices for Improving Customer Experience

- The veterinary biologics label claims system is being simplified from a four-tiered system to a single tier. This will make the review of studies that support the efficacy of veterinary biologic products easier while maintaining the high quality of data reviews. In addition, APHIS is creating a website where end-users can review summaries of the efficacy data used in support of licensure of products. The new website will allow us to better utilize resources and ultimately enable products to reach the marketplace faster.
- Currently statistical data submissions come in many forms, creating a burden on reviewers and adding significant time to the review process. APHIS is working with industry partners to standardize the statistical data submitted in support of services. We expect that companies that voluntarily submit data using a new standardized template can expect to see the data review of their submissions completed in 60 to 70 percent less time.

Streamline Agency Processes to Reduce Costs and Accelerate Delivery

- The Legacy Product Reference Qualification/ Requalification Policy Project will simplify the product reference process for legacy products licensed prior to 2011 by extending the use of these references to 15 years and applying the legacy product's evaluations to the standard that was in place at the time the product was originally licensed.
- APHIS is streamlining the review process that occurs once all the materials necessary to recommend product licensure are submitted by industry. Today the process consists of multiple hand-off's and document reviews in order to ensure that the product meets all of our regulatory standards. APHIS has already identified improvements that cut several weeks from the process, and expects to find even more opportunities to speed up the process while maintaining the high quality level necessary to ensure new products are safe and effective.

