

FISCAL YEAR	AGENCY NAME	AGENCY ACRONYM
2027	U.S. Department of Agriculture	USDA



EVIDENCE PLAN

LETTER FROM SECRETARY

I am pleased to announce USDA’s Evidence Plan for Fiscal Year 2027. The results of these five studies will strengthen USDA’s ability to craft effective policies, enhance service delivery, and optimize operations in areas of strategic importance.

Rural Development’s (RD) three program evaluations address different aspects of building prosperous rural communities. Two studies assess the ability of rural communities to access non-USDA funding while the third measures the overall impact of RD funding on the wellbeing of rural communities.

The two studies by the Farm Production and Conservation (FPAC) agencies will assess the extent to which business process improvement projects improved customer service and program delivery, eliminated inefficiencies, and advanced the goals of the programs.

This plan fulfills our agency’s statutory obligations under the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018, Title I – Federal Evidence-Building Activities, Section 312 (a) and (b)(5 USC § 312).

— Secretary, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Brooke Rollins

SECTION I | EVIDENCE PLAN SUMMARY

This section provides a snapshot of the agency’s Priority Questions, evidence activities to answer them, and the alignment of each Priority Question to relevant Administration priorities.

PRIORITY QUESTION	KEY EVIDENCE ACTIVITY(IES)	RELATED ADMINISTRATION PRIORITY(IES)
<p>1 How have RD investments improved the economic well-being of rural communities?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Foundational Fact-Finding Evaluation – Opportunity Zones 2.0 • Impact Evaluation – RD Investments in Rural Areas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategic Objective 2.2: Reduce the Cost of Living for Americans • Rural Prosperity • Rural Poverty • Rural Community Development • Opportunity Zones • Economic Growth and Well-Being • Driving Capital to Rural Communities • President’s Management Agenda (PMA) – Demand Partners who Deliver
<p>2 How can RD work with other partners to drive greater investment in rural communities?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Foundational Fact-Finding Evaluation – Philanthropic investments in Rural Areas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategic Objective 2.1: Promote Private Sector Engagement and Innovation That Stimulates Rural American Economies • Rural Prosperity • Rural Philanthropy • Geography of Grantmaking • PMA – Demand Partners who Deliver
<p>3 How can USDA use business process improvement processes to increase the quality of customer service and program delivery and eliminate inefficiencies?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Foundational Fact-Finding Evaluation – Conservation Stewardship Program • Outcome Evaluation – Farm Loan Program Delivery 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategic Objective 1.2: Improve Access to and Develop New Technology for All of Production Agriculture • Farmers First Policy (https://www.usda.gov/sites/default/files/documents/farmers-first-small-family-farms-policy-agenda.pdf) • Regenerative Pilot Program – a streamlined, outcome-based conservation model • Customer Service; Efficiency and Effectiveness • PMA – Leverage Technology to Deliver Faster, More Secure Services

SECTION II | EVIDENCE ACTIVITIES

This section details the key evidence activities being undertaken to answer the agency’s Priority Questions, including evaluations. Evaluation, as defined under requirements of the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018, is an assessment using systematic data collection and analysis of one or more programs, policies, and organizations intended to assess their effectiveness and efficiency.

Activity	B	Evaluation	Fact-Finding Evaluation – Rural Opportunity Zones 2.0				
Supports Priority Question(s)...		1	2	3	4	5	
Evaluation Question(s)		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Description		<p>This study is a fact-finding evaluation. Fact-finding evaluations gather and analyze information to establish a set of facts and provide a clear understanding of events or circumstances. It entails examining evidence and developing verifiable conclusions. Fact-finding evaluations are especially useful in complex situations.</p> <p>This evaluation will assess how new, stricter criteria for designating census tracts as urban or rural affect the designation of rural communities as Opportunity Zones. The study will also establish the data needed to conduct a future assessment of how changes to the tax incentives affect the performance of Rural Opportunity Zones. Opportunity zones are an important tool in RD’s ability to reach rural communities on a basis other than income levels. Economic and community development issues in rural areas differ in character from communities with needs defined mainly by poverty. Often, the defining features are geographic isolation of communities separated by long distances, absence of large metropolitan centers, low-density settlement patterns, historic dependence on agriculture, continued population loss, outmigration, and economic upheaval or distress.</p> <p>Opportunity Zones were created to help rural communities fill funding gaps, adapt to changing economic conditions, and seek new growth opportunities. Funds have supported investments in areas such as affordable housing, infrastructure upgrades, and small business development. Opportunity Zones use tax incentives to drive investment into low-income communities through Qualified Rural Opportunity Funds (QROFs).</p> <p>While some communities may lose eligibility when tracts are reclassified as rural or not rural, the new Opportunity Zones 2.0 framework provides several enhanced benefits for investments made on or after January 1, 2027. Investors in a QROF will receive a higher basis step-up on their original deferred capital gains if held for at least five years. They also benefit from a 50 percent lower “substantial improvement” threshold. This makes it easier for rehabilitation and redevelopment projects in rural areas to qualify.</p> <p>The primary audience for this study is the stakeholders who will select Opportunity Zone tracts in rural communities using the new criteria in Summer/Fall of 2026. Using data on infrastructure, housing, and</p>					

	<p>the number of business establishments in the potential Opportunity Zones, RD will identify the clusters with capacity for economic growth.</p> <p>The methodology and data sources are as follows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data Sources: Census American Community Survey (ACS) Five-Year Survey (2019-2023); Census Designated Places and Census Incorporated Places from the 2020 Decennial Census • Eligibility Assessment: Combined ACS census tract boundaries and data on median family income and poverty rates to identify tracts eligible for Opportunity Zones 2.0. • Rural Definition Construction: The rural designation was developed geospatially using Census Incorporated Place geographies to identify cities and towns with populations over 50,000, and Census Urban Areas to represent adjacent urban zones. • Geospatial Overlays: Non-rural areas were overlaid with census tract boundaries to calculate the percentage of each tract's land area classified as non-rural. The same overlay method was applied to determine the percentage of land area within federal lands, military installations, and state or national parks. • Note: Definitive mapping and guidance on potential Opportunity Zones 2.0 census tracts will be based on updated ACS 5-year Survey data which will be released at the end of 2025. <p>Federal Program Inventory (FPI) Codes: FPI codes are not applicable. This assessment lays the foundation for a future analysis of the effectiveness of RD investments in the Rural Opportunity Zones that will be designated in 2027.</p>
Alignment to Priority(ies)	This evaluation supports Strategic Objective 2.2: Reduce the Cost of Living for Americans in USDA's <i>FY 2026-2030 Strategic Plan</i> . It also supports the USDA Secretary's vision for restoring Rural Prosperity . Rural prosperity will be achieved by ensuring that Rural Development's programs run efficiently and effectively, support the people they are intended to serve, and encourage growth. Priorities include: Rural Prosperity, Rural Poverty, Rural Community Development, Opportunity Zones, Economic growth and Well-Being, and Driving Capital to Rural Communities. This work also supports the President's Management Agenda (PMA) goal, Demand Partners Who Deliver.
Collection / Acquisition	This study will use existing datasets (see methodology above).
Topics	Rural Community Development, Opportunity Zones, Economic growth, Driving Capital to Rural Communities

Activity	2	Evaluation	Impact Evaluation – RD Investments in Rural Communities				
Supports Priority Question(s)...			1	2	3	4	5
			<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Evaluation Question(s)			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To what extent have RD investments improved living conditions, enhanced amenities and services, and reduced poverty across rural communities? 				
Description			<p>Impact evaluations assess the long-term effects of a program, policy, or intervention on its intended beneficiaries. These evaluations seek to determine the extent to which outcomes can be attributed to a program, policy, or intervention.</p> <p>This evaluation will assess the individual and collective impact of RD's programs -- Rural Housing Services, Rural Utility Services, and Rural Business Services – on the socio-economic status of rural communities between 2010 and 2025. Prior research indicates that RD programs have contributed to improved living conditions, enhanced amenities and services, and reduced poverty across rural communities. As a first step, the study will analyze RD investments in Persistent Poverty Counties and</p>				

Distressed Communities over a five-year period. Incorporating geo-spatial analysis, RD will use the findings to identify gaps in coverage and inform outreach and investment efforts in those areas.

Persistent poverty counties are defined as those where 20 percent or more of the population has lived in poverty for at least 30 years according to U.S. Census data. Distressed communities are areas facing significant economic challenges, characterized by high poverty rates, unemployment, and limited access to education and resources.

The study will also evaluate RD investments made between 2010 and 2025 to measure the overall impact of its programs on rural communities. Prior work to build a robust set of longitudinal data makes it possible for RD to address multiple questions. For example,

- To what extent do communities experience multiplier effects when they receive multiple program benefits versus participating in a single program?
- In cases where RD investments do not produce results or results are significantly smaller than expected, what factors explain these instances?

This evaluation will increase the quality of policy recommendations regarding the type and distribution of RD investments in rural communities. Understanding how, where, and why RD funding can improve communities' socio-economic well-being will assist RD when projecting what investments can achieve in a local economy. This study will also enable RD to make evidence- and science-based recommendations for programs and policies in future Farm Bills.

To evaluate impact, we will use OLS (Ordinary Least Squares) with panel data, and the model specification is as follows:

$$y_{it} = \alpha_i + \beta' x_{it} + \epsilon_{it}$$

where i indexes the entities (counties) and t indexes the time (2000, 2005, 2010, 2015). β contains the parameters of interest, α_i represent the entity effects, and ϵ_{it} are idiosyncratic errors. The independent variable (x) is aggregated RD investment in millions, 2019 inflation adjusted dollars, and the dependent variable (y_{it}) is DCI score for each five-year period.

The evaluation will use data from three sources:

- 1) RD investment data aggregated at the county level (2010 – 2025)
- 2) County level Distressed Community Index Scores
- 3) Persistent Poverty Counties as defined RD appropriations – this definition is used for the 10% set aside for persistent poverty.

FPI Program Numbers that may be affected by this work include the full range of RD investments, including in rural businesses and industries, housing, water, broadband, community facilities, energy and electrification:

- 10.351 Rural Business Development Grants (RBDG)
- 10.352 Value-Added Producer Grants (VAPG)
- 10.405 Farm Labor Housing Loans and Grants (Sections 514/516; On-Farm & Off-Farm)
- 10.410 Very Low to Moderate Income Housing Loans and Loan Guarantees
- 10.411 Rural Housing Site Loans and Self-Help Housing Land Development Loans (Sections 523/524)
- 10.415 Rural Rental Housing Loans (Section 515)
- 10.417 Very Low-Income Housing Repair Loans & Grants (Section 504 Home Repair)
- 10.427 Rural Rental Assistance Payments
- 10.433 Housing Preservation Grants
- 10.438 Housing Preservation Grants
- 10.446 Rural Community Development Initiative (RCDI) Grants
- 10.447 Multifamily Housing Preservation & Revitalization (MPR) Demonstration Program

	<p>10.448 Rural Housing Voucher Program (Multifamily Tenant Voucher Program)</p> <p>10.752 Rural eConnectivity (ReConnect) Loan & Grant Program</p> <p>10.760 Water & Waste Disposal Systems for Rural Communities (Loans/Grants/Guarantees)</p> <p>10.766 Community Facilities Loans & Grants (Direct, Guaranteed & Grants)</p> <p>10.767 Intermediary Relending Program (IRP)</p> <p>10.771 Rural Cooperative Development Grants (RCDG)</p> <p>10.768 Business & Industry (B&I) Guaranteed Loans</p> <p>10.851 Rural Energy Savings Program (RESP)</p> <p>10.854 Rural Economic Development Loan & Grant (REDLG) Programs</p> <p>10.868 Rural Energy for America Program (REAP)</p> <p>10.870 Rural Microentrepreneur Assistance Program (RMAP)</p> <p>10.886 Rural Broadband Access Loans & Loan Guarantees)</p> <p>10.850 Rural Electrification Loans & Loan Guarantees (Electric Infrastructure Program)</p> <p>10.751 Rural Energy Savings Program (RESP)</p> <p>10.855 Distance Learning & Telemedicine (DLT) Grants</p> <p>10.863 Community Connect Grants</p> <p>10.859 Assistance to High Energy Cost Rural Communities (High Energy Cost Grants)</p>
Alignment to Priority(ies)	This evaluation aligns with and supports Strategic Objective 2.2: Reduce the Cost of Living for Americans in USDA's <i>FY 2026-2030 Strategic Plan</i> . It also supports the USDA Secretary's Rural Prosperity theme and the PMA goal of Demand Partners who Deliver.
Collection / Acquisition	This study will use existing datasets.
Topics	Rural Prosperity, Rural Poverty, Economic Well-Being
Alignment to Priority(ies)	This evaluation aligns with and supports the USDA Secretary's vision for restoring Rural Prosperity . Rural prosperity will be achieved by ensuring that Rural Development's programs run efficiently and effectively, support the people they are intended to serve, and incentive greater growth.
Collection / Acquisition	This study will use existing datasets.
Topics	Rural Prosperity, Rural Poverty, Economic Well-Being

Activity	3	Evaluation	Foundational Fact-Finding Evaluation – Philanthropic Investments in Rural Areas				
Supports Priority Question(s)...			1	2	3	4	5
			<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Evaluation Question(s)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How do rural and urban communities differ in their access to philanthropic resources? How do grant flows to rural and urban communities differ? What relationship, if any, exists between a strong local ecosystem of non-profit grantmaking organizations and the ability of rural places to access these resources? 						

Description

RD provides support to rural communities in the form of financial investment and technical assistance, and through public-private partnerships to promote broad-based economic benefits. Investment in community and economic development is an important driver of local economic growth and vitality and grantmaking organizations are an important source of capital and funding. Yet little is known about how these organizations are distributed across rural and urban communities and the geographic relationship between grant-makers and grant-recipients. This fact-finding evaluation will build the data and analytical framework to better understand where and how philanthropic organizations play a role in rural economic development.

Philanthropic organizations are a key source of leadership and support for community and economic development investment, alongside partners in the private, public, and nonprofit sectors. These organizations can also bring resources to and play roles for the community that other stakeholders cannot. For example, they can be a neutral convener of leaders, discuss key issues, and achieve a consensus on a path forward. Philanthropies have flexible financial resources to address funding gaps, support feasibility studies and pilot programs, and provide matching funds needed to access other resources or loss-absorbing capital.

Research, however, has shown that philanthropic organizations, and their grantmaking activities, are not as readily available in some communities compared to others across the U.S. Given the important role of philanthropic resources in supporting local development, it is important for practitioners and policymakers at all levels to understand what grantmaking resources are available locally, what may be found in other parts of the country, and be able to craft appropriate local development strategies. This is particularly true for rural communities, which often suffer from a lack of investment from other sources.

It is important for RD and its partners to understand what grantmaking resources are available locally, and what may be found in other parts of the country, before crafting appropriate local development strategies. This is particularly true for rural communities, which often suffer from a lack of investment from non-governmental sources. This study has been designed to assist RD and USDA leadership to identify and anticipate critical gaps in philanthropic investments. In addition to publishing the data and analysis on RD's public-facing Rural Data Gateway, RD will use the results to implement a robust strategy for engaging and partnering with the philanthropic sector through the Rural Philanthropic Alliance.

The study will focus on organizations that are based in the U.S., including Puerto Rico, and provide at least \$25,000 in grants annually, on average, from 2014 to 2021. Organizations must have engaged in grantmaking for at least three of the eight years in the study period and no single year of grantmaking accounts for more than 75 percent of total grantmaking between 2014 and 2021. The study will not

	<p>include organizations that are national in nature, make more than \$75 million in grants annually, or serve and fund higher education and medical institutions.</p> <p>This study will use data from three sources:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) IRS Form-990 and Form-990pf filings for 2014 to 2021. This dataset provides the “universe” of tax-exempt grantmaking philanthropic organizations in the U.S. 2) IRS Schedule I’s and a proprietary data collection conducted by Candid will provide information grant flows from U.S. based grant-makers to U.S. based grant-recipients from 2014 to 2018. 3) IRS Business Master File for tax-exempt organizations. This data was compiled by the Urban Institute’s National Center for Charitable Statistics for 2014 to 2021. This set provides information on geographic location, financials, and the primary purpose as identified by the organization. <p>Federal Program Inventory (FPI) codes will be applicable in a subsequent phase of this initiative. That phase will focus on assessing the effectiveness of RD’s strategy to engage philanthropic organizations and align their resources with RD investments.</p>
Alignment to Priority(ies)	This evaluation aligns with and supports Strategic Objective 2.1: Promote Private Sector Engagement and Innovation That Stimulates Rural American Economies in USDA’s <i>FY 2026-2030 Strategic Plan</i> . It also supports the USDA Secretary’s vision for restoring Rural Prosperity . Rural prosperity will be achieved by ensuring that Rural Development’s programs run efficiently and effectively, support the people they are intended to serve, and incentive greater growth. It also supports the PMA goal, Demand Partners Who Deliver.
Collection / Acquisition	This study will use existing datasets (see methodology above), primarily from the IRS.
Topics	Rural Prosperity, Rural Philanthropy, Geography of Grantmaking

Activity	4	1	2	3	4	5
Supports Priority Question(s)...		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Evaluation Question(s)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How did a new requirement, introduced by the 2018 Farm Bill, that the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) must rank and prioritize renewal applications for the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) affect producer participation rates, service delivery, and conservation outcomes? • In what ways can NRCS enhance operational efficiencies for producers and staff without compromising conservation outcomes and program effectiveness? 					

Description	<p>This is a fact-finding evaluation. Fact-finding evaluations gather and analyze information to establish a set of facts and provide a clear understanding of events or circumstances. It entails examining evidence and developing verifiable conclusions. Fact-finding evaluations are especially useful in complex situations.</p> <p>NRCS's CSP provides financial and technical assistance to farmers and landowners who undertake conservation projects to improve their agricultural land. NRCS works one-on-one with producers to build a five-year conservation plan. Prior to 2018, contract renewals were automatic, based on a producer's request and their capacity to meet additional eligibility criteria. In 2018, the Farm Bill introduced a ranking requirement (in addition to the above requirements) that allows NRCS to prioritize applications from producers seeking a second five-year contract. In response to stakeholder feedback, NRCS has proposed moving to a single sign-up approach that eliminates the need for NRCS to expend additional administrative workloads to manage multiple sign-ups.</p> <p>NRCS will use the results of this evaluation to determine whether the streamlined approach maintains or improves conservation benefits relative to prior structures; aligns with statutory intent by meeting stewardship thresholds and addressing priority resource concerns; and enhances operational efficiency without compromising conservation outcomes.</p> <p>Conservation Outcomes: The study will establish the extent to which the 2018 Farm Bill affected producer participation rates and conservation outcomes by comparing pre- and post-Farm bill data. The study will also compare conservation outcomes achieved under first and second contracts to better understand at which point the return on investments in conservation initiatives stalls or declines. NRCS will rely on the following metrics:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of conservation practices implemented • Acres treated or improved by resource concern • Adoption of advanced enhancements • Continuity of conservation across contract cycles • Resource concern treatment rates • Conservation performance on newly added land • Contract completion and compliance rates <p>Operational Efficiencies As stewards of public resources, NRCS strives to deliver quality services, minimize administrative burdens on producers, and achieve internal operational efficiencies without compromising a program's goals. NRCS will use the following metrics to assess the effects of the 2018 Farm Bill on NRCS staff across contract development, technical assistance, and close-out. Data will be collected for the pre- and post-Farm Bill periods:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of applications and contracts processed • Dollars obligated • Staff hours to process new contracts • Staff hours to modify existing contracts • Staff hours for providing technical assistance
	Federal Program Inventory (FPI) program number codes: 10.924
Alignment to Priority(ies)	This evaluation aligns with and supports Strategic Objective 1.2: Improve Access to and Develop New Technology for All of Production Agriculture in USDA's <i>FY 2026-2030 Strategic Plan</i> . It also supports the USDA Secretary's priority of Farmers First. The <i>Farmers First</i> policy initiative will help Americans start family farms and keep them running for future generations. The multi-pronged initiative includes making it easier for producers to apply for programs and services, including credit; increasing access to farmland, markets, and infrastructure; helping farmers transition their operations to the next generation and enhancing risk management and business planning tools; providing affordable, reliable labor; revisiting the definition of a small farm; and deregulating energy and the environment. This work also supports PMA Priorities: Eliminate Waste and Deliver Results and Leverage Technology to Deliver Faster, More Secure Services.
Collection / Acquisition	NRCS will use administrative data to conduct the bulk of its analysis.
Topics	Conservation Stewardship Program, Burden Reduction, and Farmers First.

Activity	5	Evaluation	Outcome Evaluation – Farm Loan Program Delivery				
Supports Priority Question(s)...	1	2	3	4	5		
	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		
Evaluation Question(s)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How can USDA improve and enhance customer service and delivery of USDA Farm Loans with limited resources? 						
Description	<p>This evaluation will assess whether a set of business process improvement (BPI) initiatives to streamline loan application processes produced the desired cost savings and expedited customer service. FSA, in 2025-2026, will initiate several initiatives to eliminate, revise, or streamline program requirements that do not add value or may negatively affect portfolio performance. Some loan underwriting and servicing requirements, for example, affect the delivery of farm loans and unnecessarily tie up staff time. In addition to improving program delivery, the improvements have the potential to reduce the number of FTEs needed to process certain components of farm loans, allowing resources to be reallocated to other mission-critical functions. The BPI will address both administrative improvements and regulatory changes.</p> <p>FSA will use the results of the FY 2027 evaluation to determine which improvements become permanent and whether to expand pilot programs based on program delivery timeframes, customer satisfaction, and loan repayment rates. The evaluation will assess the results of the BPIs using existing administrative data and data collected as program changes are implemented to answer the following questions:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> To what extent and by what magnitude did the pilots reduce loan processing times? In what ways and by what magnitude did FSA reduce staff time or number of staff needed to process loans? Which changes had the greatest effect on staff workloads and processing times? <p>To answer these questions, FSA will track the effects of process changes on the following variables using pre-streamlining metrics as the baseline. FSA is particularly interested in reducing processing times without negatively affecting loan repayment rates.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Processing time: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Date of application submission to date of application complete Date of application complete to date of disposition Date of disposition to date of closing Flexible repayment term use: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Percentage of applicants requiring flexible repayment terms Workload analytics reflecting staff time allocated to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Loan making activities Loan service activities Routine servicing activities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Amount/number of activities no longer required as a result of the process improvement efforts Number of activities still completed Delinquency and loss rates: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Comparing direct and guaranteed delinquency rates Employee and customer satisfaction <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Survey of field Survey of customers <p>The following programs are potentially impacted by the proposed changes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 10.099 – Conservation Loans 10.128 – Heirs’ Property Relending Program 10.404 – Emergency Loans 						

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 10.406 – Farm Operating Loan and Loan Guarantees • 10.407 – Farm Ownership Loans and Loan Guarantees • 10.421 – Indian Tribes and Tribal Corporation Loans • 10.449 – Boll Weevil Eradication Loan Program
Alignment to Priority(ies)	This evaluation aligns with and supports Strategic Objective 1.2: Improve Access to and Develop New Technology for All of Production Agriculture in USDA's <i>FY 2026-2030 Strategic Plan</i> . It also supports the USDA Secretary's priority of Farmers First. The <i>Farmers First</i> policy initiative will help Americans start family farms and keep them running for future generations. The multi-pronged initiative includes making it easier for producers to apply for programs and services, including credit; increasing access to farmland, markets, and infrastructure; helping farmers transition their operations to the next generation and enhancing risk management and business planning tools; providing affordable, reliable labor; revisiting the definition of a small farm; and deregulating energy and the environment. This work also supports PMA Priorities: Eliminate Waste and Deliver Results and Leverage Technology to Deliver Faster, More Secure Services
Collection / Acquisition	FSA will use existing administrative data and data collected as part of the business process improvement initiatives.
Topics	Credit or Financing programs, Program efficiency and effectiveness, Customer Service, American Farmers

SECTION III | CHALLENGES

This section details any challenges to developing evidence as part of answering the Priority Questions, including any statutory or other restrictions to accessing relevant data.

USDA anticipates the following challenges to answer the Priority Questions described earlier in this Plan:

1. Staffing resources.

- Loss of staff with specialized knowledge, skills, and abilities to conduct rigorous evaluations or other evidence-building work.
- Loss of staff overall means that the evaluation staff (such as data analysts) are now supporting work that would previously have been done by program staff.

2. Data Modernization:

- Legacy IT systems and data management practices are a critical enterprise risk for RD and FSA, specifically, and USDA more broadly. To address this risk, USDA needs to be able to implement data modernization plans. Two key components of the Data Modernization plan include an Enterprise Data Warehouse with automated flow of program data from source systems and a process for Master Data Management to ensure data quality and accuracy. Achieving a modern data environment will enable USDA to support enterprise reporting, maintain updated dashboards, and implement data mining and artificial intelligence solutions.
- USDA relies on legacy IT systems across the department. This makes data sharing among agencies and staff offices cumbersome. Increased reliance on administrative data for evidence work further highlights the need for modernizing how USDA collects, stores, protects, and shares information.

3. Strategic Direction:

- USDA is in the process of developing a strategic plan. While mission-level leadership have approved the work described in this Plan, agencies may need to pivot resources to support the USDA Strategic Plan.