

**United States Department of Agriculture  
Open Government Plan  
March 2010**

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## 1.0 Introduction

This USDA Open Government Plan represents the Department's response to Office of Management and Budget (OMB) Directive M-10-06. This directive calls for an agency roadmap addressing President Obama's Open Government Initiative.

### 1.1 The Open Government Initiative

President Obama's first executive action upon taking office, the Open Government Memorandum, calls for a more transparent, participatory, and collaborative government.

Within the memorandum, President Obama states, *"My Administration is committed to creating an unprecedented level of openness in Government. We will work together to ensure the public trust and establish a system of transparency, public participation, and collaboration. Openness will strengthen our democracy and promote efficiency and effectiveness in Government."*

As part of the Obama Administration's effort to change how Washington does business, the White House issued the Open Government Directive requiring Federal agencies to take immediate, specific steps to open their operations up to the public. The directive, released by the OMB, sets an unprecedented standard for government agencies, insisting that they achieve key milestones in transparency, collaboration, and participation. The White House unveiled the directive on a live Web chat hosted by Federal Chief Technology Officer Aneesh Chopra and Federal Chief Information Officer Vivek Kundra.

White House OMB Director Peter R. Orszag stated, "The President has been clear from day one in office: the Federal Government must break down the barriers between it and the people it's supposed to serve. Today's announcement will help to make government more open, transparent, and accountable to bridge the gap between the American people and their government."

The directive stems largely from the unprecedented Open Government Initiative, coordinated by the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy, in which the Administration reached out directly to the American people for specific policy recommendations. Thousands of citizens participated in the online forums and offered ideas on how to transform the government into a more transparent, accountable, participatory operation.

In addition to the directive, the Administration released the Open Government Progress Report to the American People – an analysis of the steps already taken to increase transparency and a look at the actions on the horizon. Every Cabinet Department is launching new open-government projects that will spark significant expansion in public accountability and access.

The Open Government Directive puts accountability and accessibility at the center of how the Federal Government operates. It instructs agencies to share information with the public through online, open, accessible, machine-readable formats. Agencies are to inventory existing information and establish a timeline for publishing them online. These moves are designed to increase agency accountability and responsiveness, improve public knowledge of the agency and its operations,

further the core mission of the agency, create economic opportunity, and respond to need and demand as identified through public consultation.

The three principles, or core values, of transparency, participation, and collaboration form the cornerstone of an open Government. Transparency promotes accountability by providing the public with information about what the Government is doing. Participation allows members of the public to contribute ideas and expertise so that their government can make policies with the benefit of information that is widely dispersed in society. Collaboration improves Government effectiveness by encouraging partnerships and cooperation within the Federal Government, across levels of government, and between the Government and private institutions.

## 1.2 USDA Supporting Open Government

On January 20, 2010, Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack announced "*President Obama's Open Government Initiative serves as a new government-wide charge that will transform how the government engages the American people in a more open and transparent manner.*" In response to President Obama's Open Government Initiative, the Secretary of Agriculture has directed USDA leadership to fully support the Open Government mission and core values, and enable and support public participation in the process.

On December 8, 2009, OMB issued Memorandum M-10-06, Open Government Directive. This memo provides task level details in support of that directive. Based on OMB M-10-06, there are 10 task items, of which 3 require direct USDA action. The specific activities that the Department is working on to meet the OMB requirements are outlined below.

### **Publish Government Information Online**

Within 45 days, by January 22, 2010, publish online in an open format at least 3 high-value datasets, and register those datasets via Data.gov. These must be datasets not previously available online or in a downloadable format.

### **Implement Open Government Web site:**

Within 60 days, by February 6, 2010, create an Open Government Web site, located at <http://www.USDA.gov/open>. This site will serve as the gateway for agency activities related to the Open Government Directive. It shall be maintain and updated in a timely fashion.

### **Create and Institutionalize a Culture of Open Government Publish Open Government Plan on Open Government Web site**

Within 120 days, by April 7, 2010, develop and publish on its Open Government Web site an Open Government Plan. The plan will describe how it will improve transparency and integrate public participation and collaboration into its activities.

## 1.3 Open Government Supporting USDA Strategic Goals

When Abraham Lincoln founded USDA in 1862, he referred to and labeled it as "The Peoples Department." It is a description that is as true today as it was then.

The Department touches the lives of Americans every day, in every way. USDA impacts many of our Nation's largest industry sectors, and works in partnership across most, if not all, of our other Federal Executive Branch partners and Congress. As such a resourceful interface of our American traditions, past and present, openness and transparency have been the cornerstone of the Department's success.

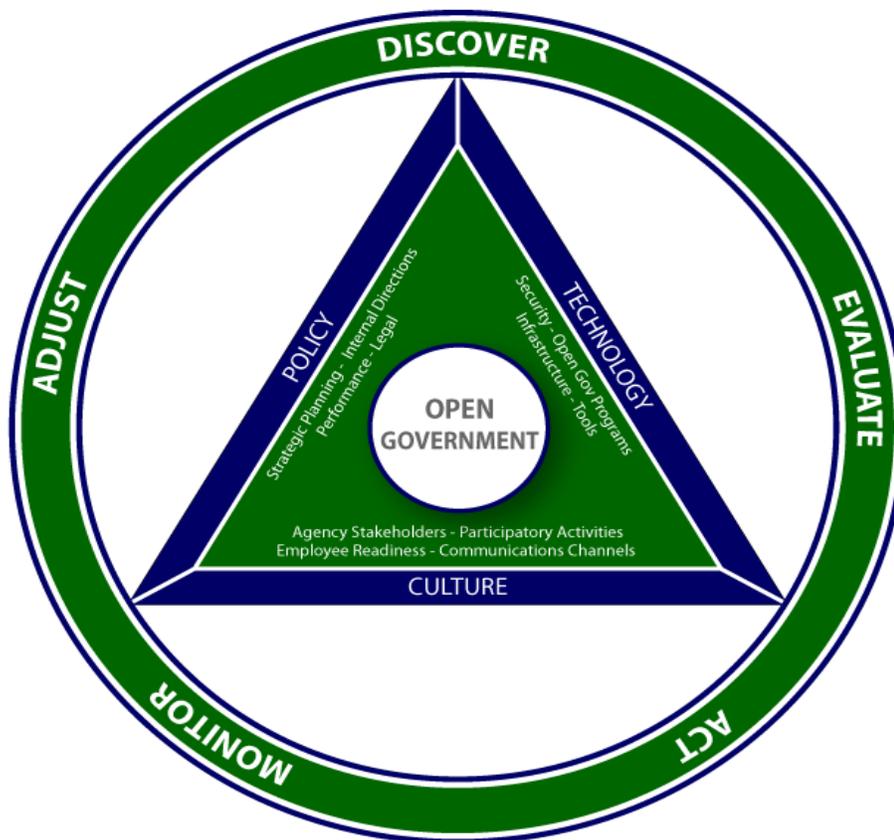
With the history and mission of USDA in mind, the *FY 2010 – 2015 Strategic Plan* forms the basis on delivering on the vision, promises, and objectives of the Department. The strategic plan lays out the Secretary's Core Values, which outline the vision that USDA will work towards in order to be successful in carrying out its mission. Our success depends on:

- **Transparency:** Making the Department's management processes more open to help the public learn how USDA supports the American public everyday in every way;
- **Participation:** Providing opportunities for USDA constituents to shape and improve those services provided by the Department;
- **Collaboration:** Working cooperatively at all governmental levels domestically and internationally on policy matters affecting a broad audience;
- **Accountability:** Ensuring that the performance of all employees is measured against the achievement of the Department's strategic goals;
- **Customer Focus:** Serving USDA's constituents by delivering programs that address their diverse needs
- **Professionalism:** Building and maintaining a highly skilled, diverse, and compassionate workforce; and
- **Results Orientation:** Measuring performance and making management decisions to direct resources to where they are used most effectively.

These core values align with the goals of open government, and put USDA in a position to be a successful, citizen-focused agency that operates in a transparent and open manner.

## 2.0 Principles and Approach

The Open Government Initiative represents a significant shift in the way Federal agencies conduct business and engage with the public. This USDA Open Government Plan is just one part of the larger Department Strategic Plan to increase transparency and openness. More specifically, this Open Government Plan describes how USDA will improve transparency and integrate public participation and collaboration into its activities, while also recognizing the Department's current and ideal cultural, policy, and technological environments. USDA has adopted a comprehensive approach to help plan and implement the transformations required to achieve the Open Government initiative. This planning approach, shown below, includes stages of Discover, Evaluate, Act, Monitor, and Adjust.



### 2.1 Organizations, Committees, Working Group

Upon the release of OMB's Open Government Directive in December 2009, USDA worked swiftly to create an organizational structure that would establish open government within the Department. At the top of this structure is the Open Government Steering Committee. This committee oversees and ensures proper agency accountability in the Open Government process. Serving as liaisons to the steering committee is the Open Government Advisory Council. This body reviews

recommendations made by the working groups and provides feedback and approval on work submitted to the steering committee. The final pieces of the organizational puzzle are several Open Government Working Groups. These groups are comprised of subject matter experts that provide expertise in the group's area of focus. They can contribute to the work required to complete the tasks that will enable USDA to become compliant with all of the requirements of OMB's Open Government Directive. These organizations will ensure that this Open Government Plan and the open government activities and initiatives undertaken align with the *USDA Strategic Plan*, and meet or exceed the open government directive criteria.

The diagram below illustrates how Open Government is organized at USDA:



## 2.2 Open Government Community Outreach

Open Government implies opening the agencies to the community. USDA is actively engaged in opening itself, making it more accessible and accountable to citizens. To foster accessibility, USDA recently launched its own Open Government Web site, located at <http://www.usda.gov/open/>. The site serves as a gateway for USDA activities related to the Open Government Directive. More specifically, it boasts two different sections for citizen idea-sharing. In the first of these sections, citizens can learn about and comment on such USDA information as available and proposed datasets, records, reports, and other resources. The second section encourages citizens to post their own ideas about transparency, collaboration, and participation at the Department. Here, the public can submit comments or vote on other ideas to help USDA create its Open Government Plan and be more innovative and efficient.

Community outreach and program education are integral to the People's Department. USDA provides training, fact sheets, electronic information. It also hosts meetings and forums to spread the word about our mission, and inform farmers and would be farmers about the many programs and services we offer and how to access them. The [Education and Outreach Web site](#) contains information and links for these programs.

In addition to providing a forum for citizen participation, USDA agencies are responsible for responding to public input received on the Open Government Web site regularly, as well as maintaining and updating it in a timely manner. To ensure accountability, USDA is working to develop ways to present and evaluate its progress. Available on the Open Government Web site, the USDA Open Government Dashboard will allow the Department to evaluate its progress in addressing USDA's Open Government objectives. These steps are just the beginning of a new and open way of doing business at USDA.

In addition to asking the public for feedback on the open government plan through open government Web site, USDA employees have actively participated in the ongoing Open Government Directive Workshop Series - an unpaid, transparent volunteer effort and a partnership between the public and private sectors. Each workshop has been spearheaded by a Federal agency and publicized online at [OpenGovPlaybook.Org](http://OpenGovPlaybook.Org). USDA has been invited to host the fourth workshop in the series in late April, where the focus will be on identifying and addressing solutions to challenges in implementing Federal agencies' open government plans.

### 2.3 High-Value Datasets

One of the key components of open government is making data open and available to the public. Allowing the public to access and view raw data and published datasets increases transparency and allows for greater citizen collaboration and participation opportunities. To accomplish this goal, the Executive Branch created Data.gov to increase the ability of the public to view, access, download, and use government produced data. Each Executive Branch agency was instructed to nominate datasets for inclusion on Data.gov. This information includes three datasets identified as being high value. The high-value datasets are required to include data that were previously not available or easily accessible to the public, either online or in a downloadable format.

USDA agencies nominated datasets that they owned to be considered for inclusion as Data.gov datasets. The working group ultimately decided on three high-value datasets to be published initially, with several more being considered for future publication. A calendar of additional datasets to be published is under development. The USDA high-value datasets published on Data.gov are:

- Census of Agriculture Race, Ethnicity, and Gender Profile Data;
- Feed Grains Database; and
- USDA National Nutrient Database for Standard Reference, Release 22.

### 2.4 Goals and Outcomes

The goals of the Open Government Plan align with the overall Department strategic goals of increasing transparency, participation, and collaboration across USDA. These three pillars of open government are part of the Department's core values and support each of the four strategic goals and the management initiatives contained in the *USDA FY 2010-2015 Strategic Plan*. Each mission area, agency and staff office

has a role to play in increasing transparency and providing openness to the public. The goals of the Open Government Plan are to:

- Develop and implement a comprehensive Open Government Plan that will provide a roadmap forward for increasing transparency, participation and collaboration;
- Raise USDA employee and agency awareness of openness and transparency in Government;
- Develop and maintain a current set of Open Government Plan guidance and standards for the Department, as appropriate;
- Champion Open Government internally, at both the mission area and Departmental level, and externally; and
- Highlight Open Government success stories at USDA and share best practices.

## 2.5 Cultural Transformation

Embracing open government and applying its principles to the day-to-day operations of USDA means changing the culture and how things are done. The ideas and functions that lead to transparency, participation, and collaboration are ones that need to be rooted in all levels of USDA to truly achieve open government. The change must occur at all levels of the organization, from leadership to staff and direct interaction with citizens. To meet the challenge of transforming the Department into a premier organization and model employer, a Transformation Task Force was launched. This task force, led by the Secretary and comprised of a diverse group of USDA leadership, is developing a plan to achieve cultural transformation at USDA. The goals of the task force include:

- An inclusive workplace environment where there is equity of opportunity and all employees are empowered to reach their full potential;
- Modernization of technology and systems that will enable us to provide the highest level of service;
- A commitment by USDA employees to improving USDA's past and future record of civil rights, including expanded outreach efforts to socially-disadvantaged farmers and ranchers;
- Systems of accountability that encourage all employees to achieve high standards of performance and customer service; and
- A renewed commitment to creating diversity in the workforce and succession planning.

The changes will be led by leadership, but will include employees and be largely implemented from the ground up. Making USDA a model employer that is open, responsive, transparent, collaborative, and highly effective is a goal shared by all employees of the Department. Improving the way Government interacts and engages with citizens leads to changes in operations and policies, and in turn leads to overall cultural change. The Department's flagship initiatives, such as the USDA Policy Gateway, will drive our cultural transformation to ensure that USDA is rightly perceived as a trustworthy, collaborative, and service oriented world agricultural leader.

Being open to new channels of communication and collaboration among employees and citizens is one step toward cultural change. The rise of social media and online interaction is a great enabler for this change. While opportunities for direct interaction with citizens have traditionally been limited in number and scope, new tools have decreased those limits. Constantly connected users can share their ideas, view existing ideas, and provide feedback on any number of issues. Technology alone cannot change policies and traditions. Effort must be made to change the policies as needed. The barriers that exist to employees and citizens embracing technologies will be addressed in ways that maintain security while still allowing for open government. Employee engagement is an important component for cultural change. USDA will modify performance plans and provide training, incentives, and awards all designed to integrate Open Government core values into everyday actions. Create incentives for employee and organizational collaboration, spot awards, priority points in awards

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## 3.0 Transparency

*“A basic tenet of healthy democracy is open dialogue and transparency.”  
– Peter Fenn*

Transparency within government can be defined as opening the Government to citizens by providing information, and therefore promoting accountability.

USDA will provide an open, responsive, and accountable environment for the purpose of having a more informed public; safe, reliable, and accessible food supply; health education; and user-friendly technology supporting information about programs.

### 3.1 Goals

Transparency is an integral guiding principle on how the Department intends to exist as a catalyst for helping the public learn how Government, USDA, does provide the substantial support that is entrusted to our 110,000 dedicated civil servants to deliver the benefits to our constituents. Transparency provides a number of concepts that will serve as the guiding philosophy for which USDA perceives Open Government. USDA will serve as a model of transparency to the American people by accomplishing the following goals:

- Continuously educate the American public about the Department’s programs and decision-making processes;
- Prioritize data and release processes;
- Provide truly new, high-value datasets and information holdings;
- Utilize state-of-the-art, user-friendly technology to monitor, stimulate, and incorporate innovative uses of information.

### 3.2 Opportunities to Overcome Challenges

In order to meet its transparency goals, USDA has several ideas, initiatives, and programs that allow the public to view the Government’s information and data. Each of the Department’s goals provides a different aspect of transparency to the public, and as a whole, the goals move USDA towards doing its work in an open and transparent manner.

#### **Continuously educate the American public about the Department’s programs and decision-making processes.**

Information about USDA’s programs and decision-making processes is not consistently transparent or easy to understand and access. To make our processes more transparent, USDA is committed to improving openness and access to information across all levels of the Department. Specifically, USDA is making more information available to reduce the need for FOIA requests, improving Web sites and search capabilities, and providing more information on our planning and decision-making processes. In addition, USDA is actively educating the public about its programs and activities by hosting public events, town hall meetings, and round table discussions.

The OMB IT Dashboard stands out as an exemplary example of a USDA initiative aimed at better informing the public about ongoing programs and processes at USDA. Because the IT discipline is maturing rapidly, it is imperative that USDA offer greater visibility into its IT investments. The Dashboard is thus the “public face” for USDA’s investments and IT projects. It provides the public with a clear look at the Department’s IT investments, the economic and programmatic rationale for those investments, and various schedules and performance information. To learn more about USDA’s IT investments, visit the [IT Dashboard](#) now!

In addition to providing information about our investments and decision-making processes, USDA also recognizes the need to share information about the progress of all its programs and the daily activities of its employees. To this end, USDA is exploring avenues that would allow the Department to publish information like the Secretary and Deputy Secretary’s business calendars or lists of action items and meeting minutes.

### **Prioritize data and release processes.**

USDA does not currently have a clear data prioritization and release process that is available to the public. The Department is exploring ways to open the information dissemination process and make available the criteria for prioritization as well as the schedule for releasing data. The Department currently publishes data in many different ways and locations. Several agencies place data on public-facing Web sites and information portals, and there are ways for members of the public to obtain data on physical media or in print. A data prioritization and release process will provide clarity to when and how USDA releases data to the public, and standardize expectations across the Department for how data should be released. Establishing a clear process for will allow USDA to proactively move towards greater transparency and openness by taking the initiative to release its data to the public in clear and useful ways.

One idea that is being explored is creating a calendar that provides a timeline for the release of data sets to the public. The calendar would allow the public to know when data would be released, and know what data the Department has prioritized for release.

### **Provide truly new, high-value datasets and information holdings.**

Datasets and information holdings published by USDA are not always easily accessible or usable for public consumption. In order to lessen confusion and improve the public’s ability to use USDA data and information, the Department is actively working to expand on and clarify the data that is already published. In addition to making currently published datasets more accessible and easier to understand, USDA is working to publish new high-value datasets and information holdings in a consistent and timely manner. Finally, USDA is exploring ways to more clearly define its process for managing public feedback and requests received from its data sharing Web sites.

One example of an initiative currently in use at USDA is Data.gov. USDA utilizes Data.gov to increase the ability of the public to find, view, access, download, and use USDA produced data. Data.gov provides the public with information about how to find and use datasets, as well as tools to leverage that data for consumption.

Currently, USDA has four datasets published on Data.gov, and is actively working to identify more candidates for inclusion. [Discover more!](#)

In addition to providing the public with data related information, USDA provides information on its spending as well. Through USASpending.gov, the Department shares information about its investments, awards, grants, and loans with the citizens. USASpending.gov provides information on all Federal contracts in a manner that is easily accessible and comprehensible. Because much of this information regards the use of American tax dollars, this initiative in particular is critical to establishing trust between the citizens and the government. Moreover, it holds the government and departments like USDA accountable for being honest and fair about what they use their money for. [See where your money goes!](#)

### **Utilize state-of-the-art, user-friendly technology to monitor, stimulate, and incorporate innovative uses of information.**

The availability of information to the public in a way that is user-friendly and understandable has been a challenge at USDA. New technologies allow the Department to use and publish information in user-friendly ways. Information on USDA programs, policies and activities is available in real time to the public in ways that allows them to monitor the Department's activities and provide immediate feedback. By embracing innovative new technologies, USDA is providing the public with ways to monitor its activities and stimulate greater participation in its processes.

One such new technology is eRulemaking. USDA participates in the eRulemaking process to ensure that proposed rules and regulations benefit from public review and comment. USDA publishes its proposed and final rulemaking actions, notices, and related information in the Federal Register. By publishing this information, USDA ensures that its constituents can easily monitor the rules and have visibility into the rule making process.

Also noteworthy is the Department's use of Recovery.gov. Since the passing of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA), USDA has utilized Recovery.gov to provide easy access to data related to Recovery Act spending. Recovery.gov allows the public to track the spending of stimulus money throughout USDA and provides reports of potential fraud, waste, and abuse through the use of user-friendly tools. These tools, which include charts, graphs, and maps, offer both telescopic and microscopic views of Recovery projects across the country and are consistently enhanced and refined so as to ensure their easy use. [Track the money!](#)

### **3.3 Outcomes – Clarity and Accountability**

As a result of USDA's efforts to increase the information it makes available to the public, citizens have clear insight into the activities of the Department and can hold the Department accountable for its use of taxpayer dollars. Providing greater accessibility to data and current information gives the public a better understanding of USDA as an organization. Greater transparency also provides the public with the tools and information it needs to provide USDA with valuable feedback and suggestions. Ultimately it is this kind of citizen feedback that helps us shape our future policies and programs and become the best agricultural service provider we can be.

## 4.0 Participation

*“We think in America that it is necessary to introduce the people into every department of government as far as they are capable of exercising it, and that this is the only way to insure a long-continued and honest administration of its powers.”*

– Thomas Jefferson

*“A nation is really strong when everybody’s got a piece of the action. Everybody.”*

– Frank Zappa

Participation “allows members of the public to contribute ideas and expertise so that their government can make policies with the benefit of information that is widely dispersed in society.” Citizen participation is an integral component of USDA’s work. Through public participation USDA becomes more aware of what issues the American public feels passionate about. With that in mind, the Department can then frame its policies and programs around issues that the American people want to see so as to ultimately provide better customer service.

As a part of open government, USDA will expand the opportunities for the public to contribute ideas and expertise in shaping policies and services provided by the Department.

### 4.1 Goals

USDA has a number of channels currently available that offer real, concrete opportunities for committed and engaged citizens to participate in its decision-making processes. Many of these opportunities may not be as robust or widely understood as they can be. More fundamentally, public expectations are changing. Today’s near-universal availability of interactive social media and real-time data feeds and communication have revolutionized private-sector business and the institutions of civil society. This technological advancement poses a challenge to USDA and other Federal agencies. The Department will step up and harness new technologies and new interest in 24-7 government to deepen public participation by pursuing the following objectives:

- Expand and improve the participation processes and mechanisms;
- Guide the public involvement and outreach in participating in developing and implementing policy;
- Build on existing outreach efforts and expand those efforts to all constituencies, key stakeholders; and
- Improve education for employees on public participation processes.

### 4.2 Opportunities to Overcome Challenges

Expanding participation with citizens and other government partners is an important goal for USDA. Each of the goals established for moving towards greater participation is aimed at improving participation in a specific way. The ideas, initiatives, and programs associated with each goal are specific ways that the Department will move to improve and enhance participation processes.

**Expand and improve the participation processes and mechanisms**

USDA recognizes that it could be reaching more people and taking greater advantage of new technologies to make participation easier. To reach out to a more engaged citizenry, USDA is expanding and improving the participation process. Specifically, the Department is adopting more user-friendly tools to reduce barriers to participation. These tools enable the public to personalize their interaction with USDA. They also allow the public to contribute directly to subject matter discussions that interest them.

The MyPyramid for Kids initiative is one such program at USDA that is encouraging greater participation through the use of new and improved tools and technologies. MyPyramid for Kids is a child-friendly version of MyPyramid designed for 6-11-year-olds. MyPyramid for Kids allows school children to use the interactive tools to personalize eating plans, make healthy eating choices, and be more physically active. On the site, kids can play a nutrition game, color their own pyramid, or even complete meal tracking worksheets. [Let's move!](#)

In addition to initiatives like MyPyramid, USDA is exploring the use web-based communication strategies and face-to-face strategies to extend its outreach and call to participation. By utilizing technologies like webinars, and hosting listening sessions, USDA can make sure that it hears from everyone, even those in the most rural of communities and citizens who are not equipped with internet access.

**Guide the public involvement and outreach in participating in developing and implementing policy**

Crafting policy within the Federal Government is a complicated and technically challenging process. Involving the public in this process is equally difficult. Providing the tools to participate is only one part of the equation. USDA is prepared to help guide the public through the contribution process so they can have a hand in developing agriculture policy right alongside of us. It is providing this guidance, in addition to the necessary tools, that makes USDA a model agency for open government.

To this end, USDA is beginning a process to allow the public to participate in the creation and implementation of a modern planning rule. The planning rule would address current and future needs of the National Forest System, including restoring forests, protecting watersheds, addressing climate change, sustaining local economies, improving collaboration, and working across landscapes. The Forest Service is already operating a Web site that provides information about the development of the planning rule and opportunities for the public to submit comments and become involved. USDA will continue to use new media tools in conjunction with face-to-face interaction to facilitate wide public participation for this effort. [Help plan!](#)

**Build on existing outreach efforts and expand those efforts to all constituencies, key stakeholders**

USDA has a well established group of key stakeholders with whom it communicates effectively and efficiently. As the Department embraces the concept of a more open government, it seeks to provide equity of opportunity to a wider and more diverse citizenry. This citizenry includes those without access to high-speed Internet. To

reach the whole of the American public, USDA is building on and expanding existing outreach efforts and activities so as to reach all constituencies.

One such outreach effort is USDA's Peoples Market. USDA uses this program, as well as its seasonal Farmers Market, to extend beyond its facilities and engage Americans across the country everyday. The first People's Garden, at USDA headquarters, serves as a model of sustainable agriculture and a place to share samples of healthy locally grown food. Moreover, this initiative challenges USDA employees and stakeholders to establish their own People's Gardens in communities worldwide. Thus not only does People's Garden encourage environmental stewardship and responsibility, it also encourages outreach to and participation from nontraditional USDA customers. [Be a part of People's Garden!](#)

Aside from People's Garden, USDA is engaged in numerous outreach activities to promote public participation from all sectors of society. For example, USDA employs a Food Safety Mobile to help educate citizens in all areas about food safety issues at the grassroots level. In addition, Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food is a USDA initiative that connects consumers with local producers to create new economic opportunities for communities. USDA sees this initiative as the start of a national conversation about the importance of understanding where food comes from and how it gets to the citizens plate. Moreover, the Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food website encourages users to share their ideas and stories about food, agriculture, and local and regional food systems. [Get to know your farmer!](#)

One constituency in particular that USDA seeks to reach is Native Americans. To this end, the Forest Service's Office of Tribal Relations was created. This office is responsible for government-to-government relations between USDA and tribal governments. The office works to develop plans for consultation and collaboration with tribal governments and to ensure that programs and policies are developed in consultation with the Native American constituents they impact. [Learn more about USDA-Tribal Relations!](#)

### **Improve education for employees on public participation processes**

Participation is at times limited to employees in program areas or chains of command. Open government challenges the Department to involve employees at all levels. Greater public participation requires employees to become more familiar with the tools and processes that USDA employs for participation purposes.

USDA is working towards improving internal understanding of the participation process by encouraging all employees with policy making or rulemaking roles to receive training in public participation processes. To do this, USDA is exploring leveraging its existing instructional systems and processes, like AgLearn, to provide participation training and education. This training would inform employees of new ways to most effectively engage the public, including using the latest social media technologies, and instruct employees on how best to utilize public feedback and input for improving processes and services. In addition, as part of USDA's employee education process, the Department is exploring ways to better leverage cross-agency collaboration and outreach communication protocols across mission areas.

### **4.3 Outcomes – Active Engagement of the Public**

As a result of USDA’s efforts to increase the depth and quality of participation opportunities, citizens can assist the Department in making decisions for more prosperous and vibrant rural communities, safer and more secure food supplies, healthier natural resources, and improved nutrition for America’s youth.

Improved participation brings the Department closer to citizens. It also optimizes other Federal and private partner investments so that USDA can create policies and services that better serve the American people.

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## 5.0 Collaboration

*"Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much."*

*- Helen Keller*

*"Strength is derived from unity. The range of our collective vision is far greater when individual insights become one."*

*- Andrew Carnegie*

Collaboration is defined by the Director of the Office of Management and Budget as "[improving] the effectiveness of Government by encouraging partnerships and cooperation within the Federal Government, across levels of government, and between the Government and private institutions."

Collaboration is about creating an environment that fosters partnerships in program and service delivery. Effective collaboration enables the government to harness the innovative ideas and know-how of the private and public sector. To ensure that it is a model agency for open government, USDA will improve upon existing partnerships and establish new sustainable collaborative ones in order to develop and enhance a shared understanding of the USDA mission.

### 5.1 Goals

The Department maintains a wealth of information and provides a wide range of services and support to employees, citizens, businesses and other stakeholders in the U.S. and abroad. Through new and improved collaboration initiatives and processes, USDA can streamline and standardize the way in which it interacts with both internal and external stakeholders collaborate, thereby improving service. USDA will pursue the following goals to maximize collaboration opportunities and results:

- Create a cultural, technical and policy environment that fosters partnerships in program and service delivery;
- Harness the innovative ideas and know-how of the private and public sector as well as citizens to achieve our shared objectives and improve the lives of Americans;
- Create incentives for employee and organizational collaboration; and
- Harness the power of technology to support collaboration to enhance efficiencies and reduce process redundancies.

### 5.2 Opportunities to Overcome Challenges

Improving collaboration across all levels of USDA is an important goal. The specific goals and their related ideas and initiatives work together to achieve this greater collaboration.

**Create a cultural, technical and policy environment that fosters partnerships in program and service delivery.**

USDA recognizes that it is not fully utilizing collaboration processes and tools across mission areas or with external entities. To really take advantage of the collaboration efforts underway both internally and externally, USDA must create an environment

where collaboration is understood and encouraged. In order to create a fully collaborative environment, the cultural, technical, and environmental aspects of collaboration at USDA must be addressed. Moving towards an environment that allows collaboration to flourish will allow the Department to more effectively and efficiently cooperate with internal and external partners to achieve its goals.

Similarly, USDA agencies are using GovDelivery.com as a communication tool to reach out to a large customer base. Interested stakeholders can select to be notified immediately as information is released in any of 109 categories. FSA, for example, has nearly 26,000 users, with an average of four topics chosen per user. Recently, FSIS and the Food and Drug Administration merged subscriber lists, allowing stakeholders to choose from all food related options between the two agencies.

In addition to the specific undertakings mentioned above, USDA is committed to developing and improving the skills and abilities of its workforce to more fully utilize existing and emerging collaborative tools. To this end, USDA is exploring processes to formalize its standards, expectations, and policies for collaboration with all stakeholders. In conjunction with this effort, the Department is working to engage communities using web-enhanced communications whenever possible to enhance collaborative working opportunities across agencies or with other stakeholders.

**Harness the innovative ideas and know-how of the private and public sector as well as citizens to achieve our shared objectives and improve the lives of Americans.**

USDA recognizes the need to improve and further develop methods for soliciting collaboration opportunities and a systematic approach for then managing those collaborative relationships. To accomplish this, USDA is seeking new partnerships and leveraging existing relationships for collaboration by soliciting input on successes to serve as a model across the Department. USDA is also broadening the use of collaboration and discussion tools to actively engage stakeholders and maintain open lines of communication. Adopting a more proactive communications focus and framework will enable the Department to collaborate more efficiently with the public and across government agencies.

One example of how USDA is harnessing existing partnerships to achieve shared objectives is The President's Food Safety Working Group. This working group is a partnership between the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services which seeks to modernize food safety by building collaborative partnerships with consumers, industry, and the Department's regulatory partners. [Learn, participate, and stay informed!](#)

**Create incentives for employee and organizational collaboration.**

As we pursue more open government at USDA, increasing employee awareness of the value of collaboration is vital. To increase the awareness of and encourage employee involvement in the collaboration process, USDA is working to educate, encourage, and incentivize employee contributions to the Department's collaboration efforts.

In terms of educating its workforce on the methods and importance of collaboration, USDA is exploring ways to collect and share a library of collaboration successes. Such a collection would not only serve to inform employees of what typical

collaboration efforts consist of, but would also act as an incentive to bring success to their own existing programs. In addition, USDA is dedicated to developing measurable performance standards for collaboration so as to standardize the process and hopefully peak employee interest.

In addition to informing its workforce of what collaboration is and what efforts currently exist, USDA is reaching ways to incentivize the collaboration process. Some ideas include proposing a “Collaboration Award” as part of the Secretary’s Awards given out annually, as well as creating meaningful, tangible, formalized rewards for individuals and groups that show results from collaboration.

**Harness the power of technology to support collaboration to enhance efficiencies and reduce process redundancies.**

USDA understands that it is not efficiently and effectively utilizing new capabilities that exist for improving collaboration. That said, the Department is investigating how to best utilize new media and social technologies in order to improve collaboration. In addition, USDA is incorporating these tools into new collaboration efforts and creating new processes and policies to ensure their effective use.

The Apps for Healthy Kids is just one program at USDA that utilizes new technologies to encourage collaboration. The program, which is a part of First Lady Michelle Obama’s Let’s Move initiative, is offering \$40,000 in prizes to create innovative, fun and engaging software tools and games that encourage children directly or through their parents to make more nutritious food choices and be more physically active. Apps for Healthy Kids stimulates the creativity of public and encourages the use of USDA and other official data for purposes of addressing a public need. [Lets move!](#)

In addition to existing collaboration efforts like Apps for Healthy Kids, USDA is exploring myriads ways to increase collaboration through technological means in the future. For example, USDA is discussing the idea of establishing an electronic/virtual clearinghouse on the Department website that explains and directs stakeholders to provide feedback, comments, suggestions or concerns on various agency projects, programs or policies. USDA also recognizes the potential benefits that could come from hosting online webinars addressing USDA programs, policies and issues for individuals nationwide. Webinars can bring together USDA personnel and stakeholders regardless of geographic location. Similarly, live webcasts or teleconferencing with stakeholders would enable real-time management of concerns and questions and could feature guests and experts that increase the richness of engagement. For geospatial information specifically, USDA is investigating the employment of geo-spatial tools to better target public press announcements on funding opportunities to hard-to-reach and traditionally underserved populations that can benefit from Rural Development (RD) programs and services. RD could also use the tools to solicit feedback from local leaders and citizens to further improve communications.

On an internal level, USDA is exploring ways to maximize the use of social media tools and technologies to increase collaboration amongst employees and across agencies. One idea pertaining to this is online self-service meeting space reservations. Such a tool would employ intranet resources to provide a list of all conference rooms available to employees for meetings, including their locations,

reservation contact point, size, communications resources, and any special rules on availability. Meeting planners could thus see, in real time, whether the room is available and reserve it online with an email confirmation and a copy to the person with the key.

### **5.3 Outcomes – Enhanced Partnerships and Results**

Collaboration leads to better service, which can result in lower taxpayer costs and a more efficient government. Collaboration saves time and money. By capitalizing on our successes and learning from our mistakes, we can accomplish our goals more efficiently. The more participants we have in the collaborative process, the richer and well thought out the results.

Not only will collaboration improve the delivery of service to taxpayers, but will enhance our organizational culture and lead to greater job satisfaction for our workforce. Enterprise collaboration tools will reset the baseline for internal collaboration. Improving internal workflow and procedures will lead to enhanced collaboration, partnerships and action with external stakeholders.

Government has the great ability to bring together interested parties from every sector and individuals committed to solving a problem or offering assistance. We should embrace the role of convener to work alongside others to collectively solve problems.

While some of our barriers are statutory or judicial in nature, many are within our control. These critical barriers include unclear Departmental and agency guidance on partnerships; a lack of incentives to develop new relationships; and a shortage of expertise, models, and support for formalizing collaboration. Success with existing partners and leveraging their audiences and influence will lead to new partnership development and continued and expanded successes.

The most basic, but significant, benefit will be found in the increased understanding and confidence that citizens will gain through their involvement in the collaboration process. Increased understanding will lead to more exacting and relevant suggestions and input from all concerned as each realizes priorities of the other.

## 6.0 Information Sharing

Having information on the Department's actions, policies, and processes available to the public is an integral aspect of open government. The Department has established practices for sharing information through the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), Paperwork Reduction Act (PRA), Section 508, and Records Management processes. Together, these activities serve to keep the public informed of the Department's activities, and provide transparency and accessibility.

To ensure that USDA is complying with the spirit of the Open Government Directive, we will review all existing internal policy guidance and regulations relating to the dissemination of information to the public and consider public comment on this matter. This review will take into consideration current legal interpretations of laws applicable to USDA that require special safeguarding of certain information, such as the Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008 and the Agricultural Risk Protection Act Farm. This purpose of the review is to ensure that the balance between privacy and openness is properly established from a public policy standpoint, and that procedures are in place to ensure it is maintained effectively.

### 6.1 Freedom of Information Act (FOIA)

One of the most important aspects of open government is public accessibility to government information and records. Providing citizens access to records on the USDA's activities, policies, and actions ensures that the Department is operating in a transparent manner and is responsive to the needs of citizens. While USDA strives to make as much of its information available as possible, it is not possible to publish all of the Department's information that citizens might want to access. In order to accommodate specific requests for records and information, USDA has an established program in place, both at the Departmental and agency levels to comply with the requirements of FOIA.

All Departmental records, except those exempt from disclosure due to legal exemptions and exclusions, are available to the public upon request. The Department provides a public [FOIA Web page](#) that provides information on the process and procedures for members of the public to submit a FOIA request. This page lists a six step process for the public to follow to start new requests, and lists the main FOIA contact for the Department, along with each agency's FOIA representative.

The Department maintains an electronic reading room for the public to view reports and records electronically. Specific records are made available by request, and members of the public may make appointments with the Department's FOIA officer to use the electronic reading room. This capability reduces the need for paper-based FOIA transactions and the time required for citizens to view the records they request.

Annual reports detailing the Department's FOIA requests are compiled each year. These reports are submitted to the Department of Justice and made available to the public. Several agencies currently have plans for reducing the backlog of FOIA

requests, and an overall USDA FOIA Improvement Plan is also available for public viewing.

## 6.2 Paperwork Reduction Act (PRA)

The collection of information from citizens, businesses or third parties (states, universities) enables Government agencies to comply with Federal regulations, execute their missions and provide essential services to the public. Whether the collection method is a direct request (application), a record keeping requirement that helps support regulatory enforcement or a third-party disclosure, the information collection is essential to the Government's effective operation. Just as significantly, Federal information collections levy significant burdens on the public in terms of the time required to provide the information and the associated cost of the citizen's or business's time.

Under the Paperwork Reduction Act of 1995 (PRA), any set of questions or record keeping requirements imposed on 10 or more persons, or questions which are used by Federal agencies to collect information for statistical purposes must be approved in advance by OMB. The Information Collection Request (ICR) process requires agencies to provide detailed justification and supporting explanations of how the information will be collected and why its collection is essential to an agency's mission. Additionally, the ICR process links the collection of data to the governing Federal rule or regulation, and provides an estimate of the burden imposed on the public. OMB then weighs the agency's business need for the information against the cost to citizens or businesses. Detailed information on the Department's PRA is published on an [Information Collection Web site](#).

## 6.3 Section 508

USDA fully embraces the scope and intent of Section 508; it is actively committed to ensuring that our customers and employees with disabilities have equity in the use of electronic and information technology. Accessibility allows the Department agencies and staff offices to attract and retain the best talent and maintain a productive workforce. Electronic and Information Technology (EIT) provides the tools that help USDA achieve its goals. Compliance with Section 508 ensures that the Department can include persons with and without disabilities in using EIT tools to further its goals to fulfill its mission. Consequently, Section 508 compliance contributes directly to the effective utilization of USDA's workforce and the accomplishment of its mission. Specifically, it supports USDA's fifth strategic goal -- to operate an efficient, effective, and discrimination-free organization.

In addition to the contribution of Section 508 compliance to USDA's overall effectiveness in meeting strategic goals, the Department's public channels of communication that involve electronic and information technology also benefit from Section 508's requirement for public accessibility of information delivered through EIT. One example of a specific USDA program that is tightly bound to the Section 508 requirement for accessibility of electronic and information technology to the public is the USDA eGovernment Program. The mission of the USDA eGovernment Program is to make the USDA "electronically available any place, any time ... to transform and enhance the delivery of USDA's programs, services and information." Section 508 has specific requirements to make this program accessible, so as to

include persons with and without disabilities in receiving Department services. Section 508 focuses both inside USDA and to its external publics in its requirements for accessibility of electronic information.

## 6.4 Records Management

Maintaining access to records and integrity of Federal information is an important component of open government. Records serve as the evidence of USDA's actions, and must be properly managed in order to be preserved. Maintaining these records allow the Department to be open about its prior actions and processes, and provide evidence where needed. USDA's Record Management program complies with all Departmental regulations and Federal laws. The Office of the Chief Information Officer maintains all policies and procedures for the Department's records management processes. More information is available on the Department's [Records Management Web site](#).

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## 7.0 Flagship Initiative

The USDA Open Government Executive Board is considering the following initiatives as candidates for the Flagship Initiative:

### **Initiative: National Forest System Land Management Planning Rule**

The Forest Service (FS) proposes to enhance the collaborative development of the New Forest Planning Rule. In doing so, FS will expand the use of the latest technologies and build on the collaborative tools already in place. It also would elicit public participation and collaboration to produce a better quality and more usable planning rule. Currently, FS operates a public Web site that provides information about the development of the Planning Rule and opportunities for the public to submit comments and become involved ([www.fs.usda.gov/planningrule](http://www.fs.usda.gov/planningrule)). USDA also has developed a Planning Rule Blog, where people can informally share ideas and engage in an ongoing dialogue about various aspects of the rule's development (<http://blogs.usda.gov/usdablogs/planningrule/>).

### **Initiative: Innovations for Health (Healthy Kids Challenge)**

The Food, Nutrition, and Consumer Services (FNCS) recently launched a multi-phased contest called the Innovations for Health. The first part of this challenge -- Apps for Healthy Kids — calls for American entrepreneurs, software developers, and students to use the recently released **USDA Nutrition Dataset**. This dataset allows users to create innovative, fun, and engaging applications and games. These tools are designed to encourage children directly or through their parents to make more nutritious food choices and to be more physically active.

MyPyramid for Kids is a child-friendly version of MyPyramid designed for 6-11-year-olds. MyPyramid for Kids encourages school children to make healthy eating choices and be more physically active.

Subsequent contests within Innovations for Health will include producing motivating public service announcements (*Video Challenge*) and creating healthful recipes to be used in schools (*Recipe Challenge*).

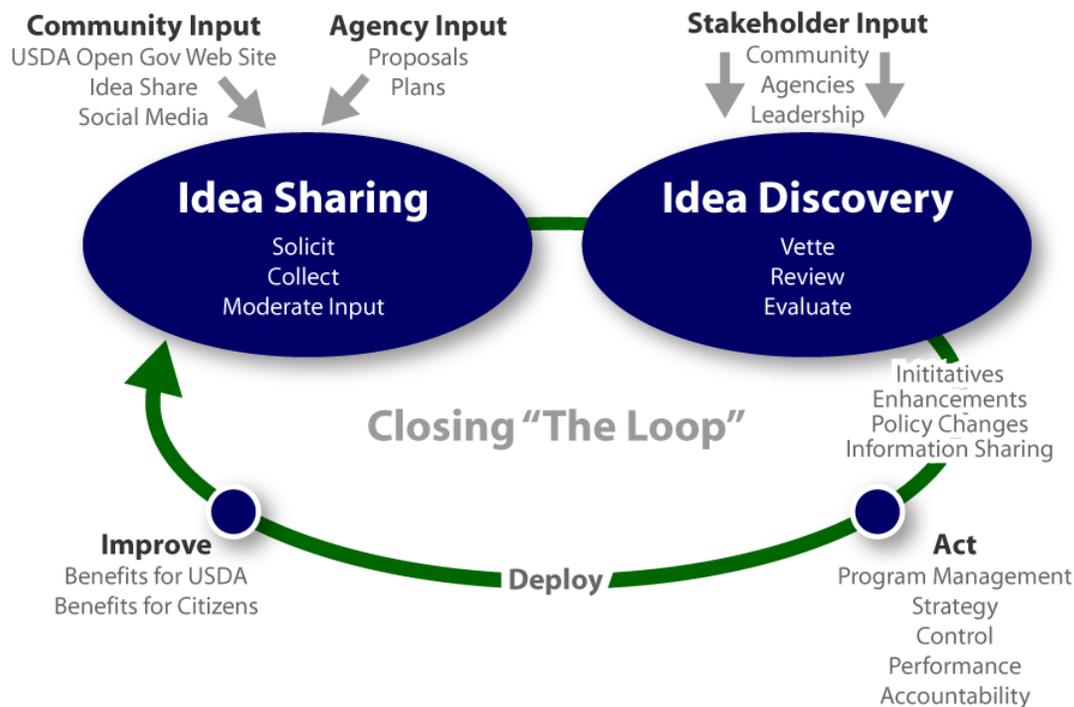
The Innovations for Health initiative aligns with the following:

- President Obama's Open Government directive – Transparency, Participation, and Collaboration;
- First Lady Michelle Obama's Let's Move Campaign;
- The Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion mission to improve the health and well-being of Americans by developing and promoting dietary guidance that links scientific research to the nutrition needs of consumers; and
- FNCS' mission to provide children and low-income people access to food, a healthful diet, and nutrition education. The agency helps nearly one in four people.

## 8.0 Governance

Open Government demands an innovative open governance model. The model must facilitate the core values of transparency, participation and collaboration in such a way that fosters and facilitates real improvement in the way USDA serves the American people. At the heart of this model is the concept of closing “The Loop.” The Loop represents a framework of Open Governance at the Department. Closing “The Loop” represents the evolution of good ideas into benefits for citizens.

### USDA Open Governance Model



#### Idea Sharing

USDA’s open governance model begins with ideas. In the past, ideas tended to flow from internal stakeholders and a limited group of external stakeholders. Open Government forces the Department to rethink the way it processes ideas. USDA is moving toward an idea sharing and discovery model. This model makes significant improvements to the way we involve the external community and internal stakeholders. Idea sharing is at the heart of this new model. It includes innovative ways of soliciting, collecting, and moderating input from all stakeholders. Revamped processes and capabilities are required to facilitate these idea generating mechanisms. New processes and capabilities must enable ideas to flow across communities and agencies resulting in improved ideas as candidates.

#### Idea Discovery

Another important process, idea discovery involves creating capabilities for vetting, reviewing, and evaluating ideas. Idea discovery must support feedback, reaching conclusions, and community response.

**Act**

As ideas move forward, they enter a USDA program process that acts on the ideas. The Department program process must open to receive validation and allow the idea community to see the idea take shape toward real improvement. This process also injects control and ensures performance and accountability. The USDA Open Government Steering Committee and the USDA Open Government Advisory Council together comprise the USDA Open Governance Board. The Open Governance Board is charged with ensuring the open government momentum is sustained, the appropriate cultural, technical, and policy infrastructure is effective, and the open governance model is successfully addressing the Department's open governance goals and objectives.

**Improve**

The improve process brings ideas into tangible benefits for citizens. Improve includes announcement, implementation, and education. Improve loops back to idea discovery, thus closing "The Loop."

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## Appendix A: USDA Strategic Plan

The goals of each component of the open government plan are designed to align with the USDA Strategic Goals established in the *FY 2010-2015 Strategic Plan*. The open government plan goals allow the Department to move towards its overall strategic goals in an open and accountable way. The Department's strategic goals are:

- Assist rural communities to create prosperity so they are self-sustaining, repopulating, and economically thriving;
- Ensure our national forests and private working lands are conserved, restored, and made more resilient to climate change, while enhancing our water resources;
- Help America promote agricultural production and biotechnology exports as America works to increase food security; and
- Ensure that all of America's children have access to safe, nutritious, and balanced meals.

In addition to these strategic goals, the strategic plan includes several management initiatives. The management initiatives are specific ways that Departmental management will work to move towards meeting the four goals. The management initiatives are:

1. Engage USDA Employees to Transform USDA into a Model Agency;
2. Provide Civil Rights Services to Agriculture Employees and Customers;
3. Coordinate Outreach and Improve Consultation and Collaboration Efforts to Increase Access to USDA Programs and Services;
4. Leverage USDA Departmental Management to Increase Performance, Efficiency, and Alignment;
5. Optimize Information Technology (IT) Policy and Applications;
6. Optimize USDA "Green" or Sustainable Operations;
7. Enhance USDA Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness to 8 Protect USDA Employees and the Public; and
8. Enhance the USDA Human Resources Process to Recruit and Hire Skilled, Diverse Individuals to Meet the Program Needs of USDA.

While each goal of the open government initiative is intended to help the Department achieve all four of its overall strategic goals, the goals utilize individual management initiatives. The mapping of each goal to its matching management initiatives is presented in the table below:

<b>Transparency</b>			
<b>Goal</b>	<b>Initiatives/Activities</b>	<b>Outcomes</b>	<b>Management Initiative Alignment</b>
Continuously educate the American public about the Department's programs and decision-making processes	IT Dashboard Information Sharing	Greater transparency and openness to the public.	1, 3, 4
Prioritize data and release processes	Calendar for releasing data	Proactive movement towards transparency and data sharing.	1,3
Provide truly new, high-value datasets and information holdings	Data.gov USASpending.gov	Provides the public with the information they need on USDA's programs and activities	3
Utilize state-of-the-art, user-friendly technology to monitor, stimulate, and incorporate innovative uses of information	eRulemaking Recovery.gov	Providing this information to the public, USDA is accountable for its actions and use of taxpayer funds	1, 5
<b>Participation</b>			
<b>Goal</b>	<b>Initiatives/Activities</b>	<b>Outcomes</b>	<b>Management Initiative Alignment</b>
Expand and improve the participation processes and mechanisms	MyPyramid for Kids Web-based communication strategies, social technologies and new media	Enable the public to personalize their interaction with USDA Enable the public to contribute directly to subject matter discussions	3, 5
Guide the public involvement and outreach in participating in developing and implementing policy	Planning rule New Media and Social technologies	Improving Policies	1, 3
Build on existing outreach efforts and expand those efforts to all constituencies, key stakeholders	Farmers Market and People's Garden Food Safety Mobile Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food Tribal Relations/Consultation	Reaching All constituencies	2, 3
Improve education for employees on public participation processes	AgLearn participation training	Employees more effective in utilizing public feedback and input	1, 4
<b>Collaboration</b>			
<b>Goal</b>	<b>Initiatives/Activities</b>	<b>Outcomes</b>	<b>Management Initiative Alignment</b>

Create a cultural, technical and policy environment that fosters partnerships in program and service delivery	GovDelivery.com Workforce development	More effectively and efficiently cooperate with internal and external partners	1, 3, 5
Harness the innovative ideas and know-how of the private and public sector as well as citizens to achieve our shared objectives and improve the lives of Americans	Food Safety Working Group	Enable USDA to collaborate more efficiently with the public and across government agencies.	1, 3, 5
Create incentives for employee and organizational collaboration	Library of collaboration successes. Proposed incentives for employees.	More employee involvement and awareness in collaboration programs.	1, 3
Harness the power of technology to support collaboration to enhance efficiencies and reduce process redundancies	Apps for Healthy Kids New media tools for collaboration.	New processes and policies for effective collaboration.	3, 4, 6

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