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USDA Offers Mobile Access and More Efficient Online Tools for Farmers and Ranchers

WASHINGTON, Feb. 10, 2012—Acting Under Secretary for Farm and Foreign Agricultural Services Michael Scuse announced today a package of technology enhancements from the Farm Service Agency (FSA) that include Web access for handheld and smartphone users, as well as a more efficient and timely option for receiving news and critical program information. The technology improvements will allow users of FSA information to gain access to easy-to-read data, including key features such as loan deficiency payment (LDP) rates, posted county prices (PCP), FSA news releases and AskFSA, the agency's online self-help knowledge base.

Today's announcement by FSA underscores USDA's Blueprint for Stronger Service, a plan introduced in January by Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack that takes a realistic view of the needs of American agriculture in a challenging budget climate, and lays out USDA's plans to modernize and accelerate service delivery while improving the customer experience through use of innovative technologies and business solutions. Three of the 27 initial recommendations implemented by USDA focus on information technology, while other process improvements already put into place by FSA have strengthened the agency's electronic customer service and online presence.

"As an increasing number of farmers and ranchers move to mobile devices and other high-tech tools, we need to keep pace by investing in the best possible customer service while making the best use of taxpayer resources," Scuse said. "The mobile website is an added convenience for farmers and ranchers and an effective, efficient way for USDA to deliver news, program information and reliable guidance on a variety of agricultural issues. And investments in technology help USDA continue to make other, more significant investments in rural America, preserving the success of U.S. agriculture in the long term."

Scuse announced the new services this morning at the Maryland Farmer's Breakfast in Crumpton, Md.

Like all websites, the FSA site is accessible through any device that connects to the Internet. The mobile site organizes the information on the website in a way that makes for easy reading on a small, hand-held screen. It does not require screen adjustments or constant scrolling and panning across the information.

A 2011 study conducted by the Pew Research Center indicated that mobile Internet access is growing rapidly. From May 2010 to July 2011, the number of adults with mobile applications jumped from 43 percent to 50 percent. The trend is expected to continue. In addition, USDA's Economic Research Service found 57 percent of all rural households use broadband Internet at home, but some 6 percent of all rural households (or over 1 million rural households) access the Internet at home solely through wireless broadband services. The new FSA site makes the information available to these households.

In addition to the mobile website, FSA is now offering farmers and ranchers a more efficient and timely option for receiving critical program information. Such things as eligibility requirements, deadlines and related information can be accessed through an electronic news service hosted by GovDelivery.

By signing up for free online communications through GovDelivery, farmers and ranchers can receive news, via e-mail, directly to their home or farm office or to their mobile devices—allowing them to receive immediate notification of farm program news that is pertinent to their agricultural operation. Through GovDelivery, producers can establish subscriber preferences by choosing to receive federal farm program and farm loan information by topic, by state and/or by county. Producers can also select as many subscriber options as they want, which allows producers in multiple counties or across state lines to receive updates from each county in which they operate or have an interest.

FSA also offers AskFSA and AskFSAmobile, an easy-to-use knowledge database with automated answers to website visitor questions. In 2011, AskFSA received 351,119 visitors—99.7 percent of whom found their answer online without the need for additional assistance.

The Obama Administration, with Agriculture Secretary Vilsack's leadership, has worked tirelessly to strengthen rural America, implement the Farm Bill, maintain a strong farm safety net, and create opportunities for America's farmers and ranchers. U.S. agriculture is currently experiencing one of its best years in decades thanks to the productivity, resiliency, and resourcefulness of our producers. Today, net farm income is at record levels while debt has been cut in half since the 1980s. Overall, American agriculture supports 1 in 12 jobs in the United States and provides American consumers with 86 percent of the food we consume, while maintaining affordability and choice. The Obama Administration has aggressively worked to expand export opportunities and reduce barriers to trade, helping to push agricultural exports to record levels in 2011 and beyond. Strong agricultural exports are a positive contribution to the U.S. trade balance, support nearly 1 million American jobs and boost economic growth.

To access FSA's mobile website visit www.fsa.usda.gov/mobile. To sign up for FSA's GovDelivery electronic news service, visit www.fsa.usda.gov/subscribe.

For information on USDA's Blueprint for Stronger Service, please visit www.usda.gov/strongerservice.

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