U.S. Department of Agriculture
Washington, D.C.

DEPARTMENTAL REGULATION	NUMBER: 3430-001

SUBJECT: Home Page Development and Maintenance	**DATE:** December 24, 2003
	OPI: Office of Communications

1   PURPOSE AND SCOPE

This regulation provides policies and guidelines for the design and publication of Department of Agriculture (USDA) organizational and personal home pages. These home pages are accessible by members of the public who have access to the Internet for telecommunications connectivity and use World Wide Web software browsers for search and retrieval services.

A home page provides the public with an introduction to or "picture" of an organizational unit. The web site may describe the unit's mission and major programs; provide guidance on ways to access significant contacts or data and information; and offer hyperlinks to other organizational units, including subordinate units, and/or to organizations outside the unit.

This regulation is designed to ensure a standard, consistent, high-quality "look and feel" for USDA home pages while encouraging innovation in the current fast-moving software technology environment and minimizing constraints on ways in which agencies present material to the public. The document is intended to express basic policies and guidelines rather than to serve as a "how to" manual on home page design.

2   SPECIAL INSTRUCTIONS/CANCELLATIONS

This regulations supersedes DR-3430-001, dated February 7, 2003.

3   BACKGROUND

Electronic information technologies such as the World Wide Web can be used to provide access to information that is well organized, easily found and retrieved, and offered at reasonable cost to information users and providers alike. These technologies provide a very effective way to communicate with members of the public who have access to the Internet through the use of personal or publicly available microcomputers.

An additional advantage of using the World Wide Web is that it offers multimedia capabilities, including sound (e.g., music and voice) and images (e.g., pictures, maps, and graphics) that can greatly increase the effectiveness of a web page. The power and utility of the World Wide Web is related to its ability to provide hyperlinks to associated documents. Such hyperlinks allow the user to easily access other sites, other documents, and other sections of the same document. Typically, hyperlinks are activated simply by selecting or "clicking on" a portion of text or an image that has been rendered as a hyperlink. Linked text is referred to as hypertext.

To achieve the desired benefits of a successful public Internet-based information service and to avoid the frustrations of an unsuccessful one, the following considerations should be kept in mind in planning and designing such a service:

a   Home pages should be accessible to users with limited as well as full access capabilities. Web site designers should be aware that many users' available microcomputer and telecommunications technologies may lack the speed and capacity of those available to the designers. Many users still access the Internet through a standard dial-up connection and have a narrow bandwidth communications capability. Some users, especially users dependent on screen reading software, will have text-only capabilities.

b   Information should be appropriate and presented in an organized manner. One major advantage of the World Wide Web is that it allows users to move easily from one linked site to another, thus accessing the web pages of other organizations worldwide. If a linkage system is not properly designed, however, users can easily get "lost" and not recognize the significance or even the originator of the information they have accessed.

An organized design incorporating the totality of information available about USDA is critical to the presentation of an accurate picture of the Department. Typically, many people are involved in generating information from a variety of sources to post on Departmental and agency home pages. The designated web site manager (also referred to as a
"webmaster" or the assigned system administrator) must coordinate with these

individuals to ensure that these home pages and associated documents present an accurate, descriptive, and representative image of the entire Department or agency and its work rather than an image that is fragmented, misleading, or incomplete.

c   The reality of worldwide access should be recognized. Home pages must be designed with the realization that the public documents they contain are accessible through an international network to users worldwide.

d   User anonymity must be maintained. Web servers referenced in this regulation provide open service to the public and must accept outside users without requiring either a local user account or a password.

4   POLICY

a   USDA fully supports the establishment of any open information server and service that (1) supports authorized mission-related activities of USDA, (2) is consistent with prudent operational and security considerations, (3) provides the public with easy electronic access to information about or disseminated by their Government, and (4) addresses the accessibility needs of individuals with disabilities as described in Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act.

Federal agencies and employees are encouraged to maintain open electronic communication with the public while recognizing that with this privilege comes the responsibility to use the electronic forum wisely in serving the public interest.

To facilitate communication between users and USDA, an e-mail contact shall be listed on the home page.

b   Only public information approved for public release through standard USDA review and clearance processes will be maintained on the home page or made accessible through links to other web pages. Unless an exception has been approved, links shall be made only to Government web pages. Exceptions must be approved in advance by the USDA Office of Communications.

c   Each home page must include a link to the "USDA Quality of Information Guidelines" as well as to agency-specific information on whom to contact to seek correction of USDA-disseminated information.

d   Security is a major consideration in the implementation of any open public access system. The planned approach to creation of a home page must include attention to web site security, including firewalls and other isolation techniques. Agency security officers must be consulted as to the technical operation of web sites. (See additional security references in Section 5.)

e   Personal home pages are permitted for individual employees in their official capacities if the information provided on the pages relates to and supports authorized USDA missions (e.g., descriptions of a USDA scientist's research) rather than serving to aggrandize any individual. USDA employees establishing personal home pages on official web sites that are accessible by the public must follow the guidelines outlined in this regulation.

f   No restrictions are in effect on use of web servers and browser software for strictly internal, nonpublic purposes, for example, agency IntrAnet sites or other internal web sites inaccessible to the public).

g   USDA and agency/staff office home pages shall be linked with the USDA Privacy Policy statement. Any agency with unique privacy requirements, other than or in addition to those outlined in the USDA Privacy Policy statement, may establish and provide a hyperlink to its own privacy statement page. Agency privacy policy statements are subject to clearance requirements and must be linked with the USDA Privacy Policy statement.

h   Persistent cookies should not be used on USDA web sites—or by contractors in designing and/or managing web sites on behalf of USDA agencies—unless all the following conditions are met:

   (1)   A compelling need to gather the data on the site exists, and a cookie provides the best means of obtaining the data.

   (2)   Appropriate and publicly disclosed privacy safeguards are in place for the handling of information derived from the cookie.

   (3)   Clear, conspicuous notice is provided on the web site that a cookie is being used.

   (4)   The Secretary of Agriculture has approved use of the cookie.

    In addition, all USDA web sites, including sites designed, operated, or managed by contractors on behalf of USDA agencies, shall comply with the standards set forth in the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act of 1998 with respect to the collection of personal information online at web sites directed to children.

i   All information under consideration for publication in web sites or home pages must be evaluated to determine whether it constitutes Sensitive Security Information (SSI). SSI may not be made available except as described by USDA Departmental Regulation 3440-002, "Control and Protection of 'Sensitive Security Information.'"

5   REFERENCES

   a   Children's Online Privacy Protection Act of 1998.

   b   Computer Security Act of 1987.

   c   USDA Departmental Regulation 3140-1, "USDA Information Systems Security
          Policy."

   d   USDA Departmental Regulation 3140-2, "USDA Internet Security Policy."

   e   USDA Departmental Regulation 3300-1, "USDA Telecommunications and
          Internet Services and Use."

   f   USDA Departmental Regulation 3040-001, "Electronic Records Management."

   g   USDA Departmental Regulation 3440-002, "Control and Protection of 'Sensitive
          Security Information.'"

   h   USDA Departmental Regulation 4030-001, "Section 508 Implementation
          Final Guidance."

   i   Office of Management and Budget (OMB) Circular A-130 (revised) and OMB
          Circular A-130, Appendix III, "Security of Federal Automated Information."

   j   The Privacy Act of 1974.

   k.   USDA Privacy Policy.

6   ABBREVIATIONS/DEFINITIONS

   a   Browser. A shortened term for Web Browser. Software used on the World Wide
          Web to access and/or retrieve documents through the use of Internet addresses
          known as "URLs." Locating documents on the World Wide Web is facilitated
          through the use of hyperlinks in hypertext documents. Browsers may support
          only line mode, full-screen, or graphics including pictures and sound. Many
          browsers with various capabilities and platforms are available. Some browsers
          are proprietary and must be purchased, whereas others are available at no cost by
          downloading from a server. Examples of currently available browsers include
          Internet Explorer, Netscape Navigator, Mozilla, Opera, and Mosaic. Most users
          in the United States currently use either Internet Explorer or Netscape Navigator.

   b   Dead link. A link to a nonexistent or non-operational page or server.

   c   Firewall. A dedicated device (hardware and software) placed between internal

and external networks to control access and prevent misuse and abuse

d   Home page. Primary page or starting point, reached through a uniform resource locator (URL).

Although a home page is described as a single document, it can contain multiple screens. An organizational home page contains information about a definable organization such as USDA an agency, or a division of an agency. A personal home page contains information related to an individual employee (e.g., a scientist whose work may be of interest to the public. See Section 4.e).

e   HTML. Hypertext markup language.

HTML is the standard language used to produce home page documents and hyperlinks to other documents. Because this is a rapidly evolving technology, and because adherence to the international standards is voluntary, some variation exists in the versions of HTML available and the HTML features supported by various browsers. Agencies need to be aware of these differences in electing a version to use. USDA will not adopt any single version of HTML.

f   ISSPM. Information Systems Security Program Manager.

g   Public document. Any document or information not subject to access limitations due to national security classification, the Privacy Act, Freedom of Information Act exemptions, or copyright protection.

h   Secondary pages. Additional pages, linked to a home page, or to another secondary page, containing additional information or resources.

i   SSI. Sensitive Security Information. Unclassified information of a sensitive nature, further defined in Departmental Regulation 3440-002, "Control and Protection of 'Sensitive Security Information.'"

j   URL. Uniform Resource Locator. A URL is the address of a resource such as a home page. The address syntax also defines the type of resource, as follows: scheme://host.domain[:port]/path/filename. The USDA home page URL, for example, is <http://www.usda.gov>

k   Web page. A document designed for access using a browser and developed in accordance with the HTML web format standard. Typically, such documents are posted on an Internet or intranet site.

l   World Wide Web (or WWW; also referred to as "the web"). A hypertext-based client/server application that guides the user to a linked collection of information in a hypertext markup language available through the Internet and accessible through common browsing software.

7   GUIDELINES

    a   Design approach

        (1)   A home page can represent the entire Department, an agency, a suborganization within an agency, or a person within an agency. The design of these types of home page will be hierarchical, with the USDA home page linking to the agencies' home pages, each agency home page linking to the home pages of suborganizations, and the home pages of suborganizations linking to personal home pages. These sites will be linked in both directions (e.g., agency home pages will link back to the USDA home page).

            Because each home page is to have its own address (URL), the user will not need to step through each level to reach the desired page. By specifying the URL of the desired page, a user will be able to access the home page directly, bypassing higher-level home pages.

            The agency home page shall indicate that the agency is a USDA organization by including the words "United States Department of Agriculture" or "U.S. Department of Agriculture" and the USDA symbol at the top, and optionally again at the bottom, of the home page. By selecting these words or the USDA symbol, which should be designed as hyperlinks, the user should be able to directly access the USDA home page.

            The home page URL should be as simple as possible and should be consistent with the naming conventions specified in USDA Departmental Regulation 3300-1, "USDA Telecommunications and Internet Services and Use."

        (2)   The home page and secondary pages should be structured around the mission of the organization and the information the organization wishes to convey to the public. The information and data an agency plans to present must be organized and its web pages structured to provide the user with the clearest possible "picture" of the organization. A "tree" structure can be useful for organizing information, though given the versatility of hypertext linkages, other modes of organization can also be effective.

            An organization's home page should be limited to a description of the organization's mission, functions, employees, and information resources. It would be inappropriate, for example, for a division's home page to describe the mission or functions of the entire agency.

An organizational home page may be linked with metadata that describe information and data available to the public upon request. In addition, the home page may provide the user with direct hyperlinks to this material.

(3)   Designers are encouraged to review the home pages of other organizations on the Internet to become familiar with effective types of designs.

(4)   Agency, program, and public affairs staffs will develop each web site jointly. The appropriate agency Information Systems Security Program Manager will review proposed web pages for security issues and clear them prior to posting online.

(5)   Home pages should be designed to support users (e.g., with limited access capabilities such as text-only browsers) who cannot or who do not wish to access pictures, graphics, or sound as well as to support users with full access capabilities.

A home page under development should be reviewed and tested thoroughly—preferably by an independent tester using a wide variety of browsers—before release to the public. The page should be accessible to Federal employees, people with disabilities, and the general public. If particular versions of browsers are required to access the content, those limitations should be explicit on the home page or on a technical page accessible through the home page.

b   Content

(1)   Home pages and secondary pages should be kept simple to avoid a cluttered or confusing appearance. As a general "rule of thumb," a list or menu should be limited to about five (plus or minus two) items.

(2)   Only USDA symbols approved by the Office of Communications or a duly authorized agency representative should be used. Agencies that are undergoing reorganization and do not have an appropriate logo should use the USDA symbol.

(3)   Secondary pages should contain navigational aids to assist the user in returning to previous pages or directly to the home page of the organization.

(4)   Links to governmental material outside USDA should be identified clearly. (See Section 7. c. 2 & 3 for additional requirements regarding linking to nongovernmental or private sector websites). Links to proprietary information or formats should be annotated appropriately. Links to large documents should inform about the file size of the document and warn of anticipated downloading time, if the time is

lengthy.

(5)   Each home page and secondary page should display the date of the most recent update of page information as appropriate.

(6)   Each home page should invite users to submit comments or suggestions concerning page content via hyperlinks to user evaluation forms or by other means (e.g., an online e-mail form addressed to the Webmaster or to Contact Us).

(7)   The use of "dead" hyperlinks is not permitted. To refer to a document or document collection that is not yet available to the public, the phrase "under construction" or "not yet available" may be used on a page without a link to the page under development.

(8)   Home and secondary pages may be constructed using 800 pixel width. The pages shall offer the ability to fully print the page using either the "Printer Friendly" technique or code that reformats a viewer's page to the browser's selected width.

c   Management

(1)   Home and secondary pages should be updated routinely to ensure that they are current and accurate and that they address topics of greatest interest to users. A "What's New" menu item linked to a page with a menu linked to new pages may be appropriate.

(2)   Hyperlinks to nongovernmental or private sector information should be used only if an official relationship—such as one involving a memorandum of agreement or memorandum of understanding—exists between the USDA program and that of the private sector organization with whose home page the hyperlink is being made. Agencies shall receive a reply in writing from the administrator or owner of the site to be linked granting acceptance of the request to link. The agency making the link is responsible for ensuring that the external link remains accurate.

(3)   A waiver issued by the Office of Communications is required for each link to a private sector website.   The Office of Communications shall establish a notice for use during linking to a private sector website that shall be used to inform the viewer they are exiting the government page.

8   RESPONSIBILITIES

a   Agencies will:

     (1)   Establish agency policy as to the levels of allowable home pages (i.e., from agency level to personal level), the content of a given document, and internal approval procedures within the framework of this Departmental Regulation.

     (2)   Consult with the Office of Communications on the development of all home pages, registering each home page and the name of the individual designated as the responsible point of contact (e.g., the agency web master) with the Office of Communications Web Master.

     (3)   Ensure that the appropriate agency cyber-security office has approved the proposed installation approach for each agency home and secondary page. Agencies also will establish responsibility for the content and currency of each agency home page and associated secondary pages, providing resources to maintain the quality and currency of the information. The assigned agency web master routinely will verify the integrity of the material, including all hyperlinks, to ensure that the content has not been accidentally or maliciously altered or replaced.

     (4)   Review and analyze usage reports and user comments to improve agency understanding of outside parties and interests accessing agency information, making modifications if necessary based on this analysis.

     (5)   Determine information sensitivity in accordance with the "Security Self-Assessment Guide for Information Technology Systems" published by the National Institute of Standards and Technology (Special Publication 800-26).

(b)   The Office of Communications will:

     (1)   Oversee the design and continued quality of the USDA home page, including the home pages to which it links, and assist agencies in the design of the appearance of the home page "look" and in identification of appropriate home page content.

     (2)   Define the information structure for all Departmental and agency home pages and associated links and maintain a registry of all such home pages along with the names of individuals designated as responsible contact people.

     (3)   Provide a list of approved agency home pages and URL's to the Information Systems Security Program Manager.

(c)   The Office of the Chief Information Officer will:

(1)   Provide customer support to agencies and staff offices in relation to technical use of the USDA Internet Access Network.

(2)   Ensure that USDA Internet access is protected by a firewall.

(3)   Ensure that the Office of the Associate Chief Information Officer for Cyber Security (a) responds to requests for guidance on security issues relating to web pages and (b) reviews security documentation to ensure adequate agency verification of security controls.

(4)   Provide each agency with guidance in determining information sensitivity, as required.

(5)   Provide guidance regarding implementation and technical standards of Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act.

-END-