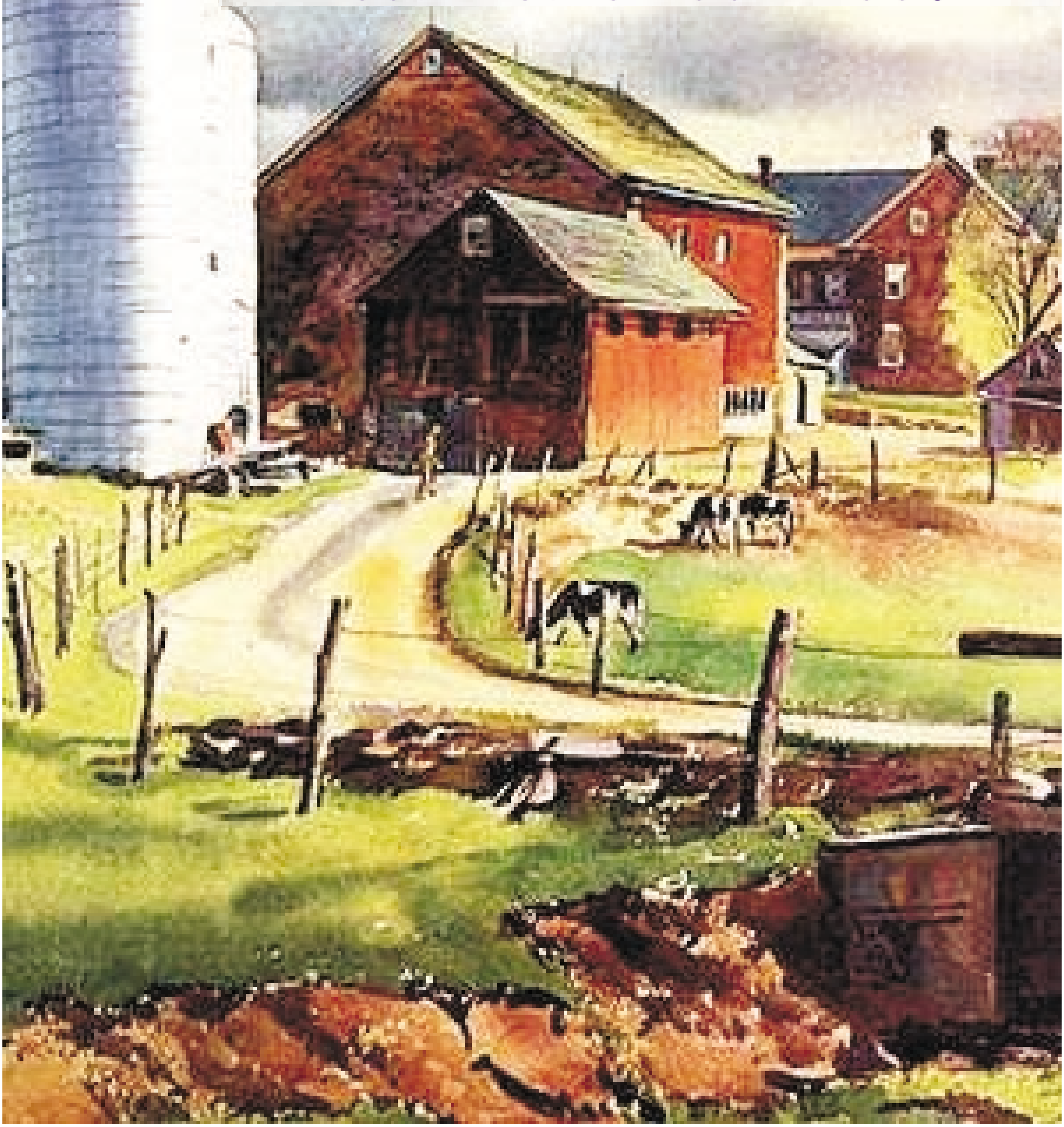
Farm Service Agency

Strategic Plan

Fiscal Years 2001-2005



INTRODUCTION

The Farm Service Agency (FSA), created by the Federal Crop Insurance Reform and Department of Agriculture Reorganization Act of 1994, P.L. 103-354, helps to improve the economic stability of agriculture and the environment through farm income support programs; farm ownership, operating, and emergency loans; conservation programs; domestic and overseas food assistance programs; and disaster assistance programs.

FSA programs are primarily directed at agricultural producers or, in the case of farm loans, at those with farming experience. These programs help farmers produce an adequate food supply, maintain viable operations, compete for export sales of commodities in the world marketplace, and contribute to the year-round availability of a variety of low-cost, safe, and nutritious foods.

FSA is headquartered in Washington, D.C., and has offices in every State, usually in a State capitol or near a land grant university, and in most agriculturally productive counties. FSA programs are currently delivered in over 2,500 USDA Service Centers.

FSA's relationship with farmers and ranchers goes back to the 1930's. At that time, Congress set up a unique system under which Federal farm programs were to be administered locally. Farmers and ranchers, who are eligible to participate in these programs, elect a three-to-five person county committee which reviews Service Center operations and makes some of the decisions on how to apply the programs. This grassroots approach gives farmers and ranchers a much-needed say in how Federal actions affect their communities and individual operations, and enables FSA to maintain close relationships with Agency customers and successfully address customer needs in an effort to improve the delivery of FSA programs. After more than 60 years, it remains a cornerstone of FSA's efforts to preserve and promote American agriculture.

This plan covers fiscal years 2001 through 2005 and updates the Agency's first strategic plan published in September 1997. The plan includes brief descriptions of FSA's major programs, states the outcomes to be achieved and the strategies to accomplish those outcomes, and addresses the major management challenges facing the Agency. The strategic plan is a flexible document which is revisited each year and updated when major program or policy changes which impact the direction of the Agency are implemented. We anticipate a major revision to this plan in fiscal year 2001 or 2002 as the priorities of a new Administration and the next farm bill are established.

MISSION

To help ensure the well-being of American agriculture and the American public through efficient and equitable administration of farm commodity, farm loan, conservation, environmental, emergency assistance, and domestic and international food assistance programs.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

- Continue to improve and deliver high quality products and services to customers in a professional, consistent, and timely manner.
- Ensure fair and equal access and participation in our programs.
- Conduct business with honesty and integrity.
- Care for and protect the environment and promote responsible stewardship of natural resources.
- Be innovative and resourceful in the procurement and deployment of information technology and use available technology effectively.
- Respect the individual differences and diversity of our workforce.

STRATEGIC GOAL 1

Provide farm income support and natural disaster assistance to eligible producers, cooperatives, and associations to help improve the economic stability and viability of the agricultural sector, and to help ensure the production of an adequate and reasonably priced supply of food and fiber.

FSA's income support and disaster assistance programs are key components of USDA's efforts to provide America's farmers and ranchers with an economic safety net to help them maintain their operations during difficult times. These programs help farmers to weather economic downturns in the highly volatile agricultural sector. The importance of FSA's direct support programs is evidenced by the amount of government support needed the past few years to help farmers maintain sufficient levels of income. Without these programs, many of America's farmers and ranchers may not have survived the low commodity prices of recent years that resulted from abundant supplies and weak markets. To illustrate the importance of these programs, direct financial support provided by FSA in 1999 comprised approximately 47% of net farm income.

Major program areas include:

- **Direct Payment and Loan Programs:** FSA provides direct payments and loans to help improve the economic stability of the agricultural sector and help ensure that the Nation's producers continue to be dependable suppliers of high quality food, feed, and fiber for domestic and international markets.
  - Marketing assistance loans, loan deficiency payments, and the Farm Storage Facility Loan Program promote orderly marketing by providing producers with income and farm storage. These programs enable producers to hold their commodities for later sale, instead of selling immediately after harvest when prices are generally lowest.
  - Through a number of one-year special programs, FSA provides payments to producers of a variety of products (including dairy products, hogs, lamb meat, wool and mohair) to help offset market downturns.
  - Production Flexibility Contract payments provide fixed income support based on a farm's historic acreage and yields. Eligible producers, enrolled during the onetime sign up in 1996, receive annual fixed but declining production flexibility contract payments for FY 1996 through FY 2002. Producers on these farms may change from year to year as leases are executed. Payments are independent of farm prices and crop production, enabling farm commodity prices to be determined by market factors rather than government subsidies and production controls.
  - Tobacco and peanut price support programs provide loans to eligible producers through loan associations under cooperative agreements with the Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC). Tobacco and peanut allotments and quotas, approved by producers in referenda, are established to help ensure a balance between supply and demand in the marketplace. Additionally, producers and purchasers of tobacco and peanuts incur marketing assessments for tobacco and peanuts (through the 2002 crop) marketed. These assessment funds, maintained in CCC deposit and trust liability accounts, are used to offset projected loan losses.

- **Continuing and Ad-Hoc Disaster Assistance:** FSA provides financial assistance to help farmers and ranchers recover from natural disasters. Assistance is provided through the Noninsured Crop Disaster Assistance Program (NAP) and ad-hoc programs legislated in response to specific disaster occurrences. Producers are eligible for assistance through NAP when natural disasters result in catastrophic loss of production or prevented planting of an eligible crop. Eligible crops include commercial crops grown for food and fiber, seed crops, ornamental crops, and aquaculture, for which crop insurance is not available.

GOAL 1 OUTCOMES

- Improve economic stability of program participants.
- Provide timely and effective services.

Strategies:

- **Expand and Streamline Customer Access to Services:** FSA is defining a new business model, the goals of which require migration away from single-agency initiatives to collaborative ventures with the principal service providers that support common agricultural enterprises. The principal service providers include sister USDA agencies and Service

Center partners; State and local government entities; and private enterprises. The business model conveys a "seamless" working environment where distance between offices and customers is irrelevant.

Historically, most of FSA's interaction with its farmer and rancher customers has been by one-on-one contact at a local USDA facility. Through these exchanges, customers learn about services available, provide information about their operations, and conduct programmatic or financial transactions. In the future, FSA will migrate to an environment where a greater proportion of information exchange and transaction processing occur through off-site alternates. Key components will include:

- providing farm program information, availability, and eligibility requirements electronically;
- providing on-line information collection and transaction processing capability, such as user-fillable forms and interactive, web-based applications, and reusing information previously collected to reduce the aggregate information collection burden on customers; and
- developing information collection and management partnerships with State and local agricultural entities and private organizations to integrate information collection and sharing mechanisms among all service providers.

Providing services in this manner will require new service delivery tools and skills and allow for 24-hour customer access to information and services.

- **Continue Education and Outreach Efforts:** FSA will educate producers about program benefits using all available sources, including radio, television, newspapers, newsletters, and public meetings in each county. National training for State specialists will continue to be held at least annually, but as often as necessary within budget constraints. State and county offices will, in turn, train personnel to administer assigned programs. More formalized Outreach initiatives, developed in consultation with the Agency's Outreach Office, will be utilized to achieve greater county-to-county and State-to-State consistency, focusing on small, limited resource, and minority producers.

- **Improve Continuing and Ad-Hoc Disaster Assistance:** Administering NAP and the ad-hoc disaster assistance programs are labor intensive processes. On an annual basis, irrespective of a disaster occurrence, State Offices and Service Centers establish, data load, and maintain historic crop market values and county historic crop yields for approximately 1,600 NAP crops. In addition, Service Centers process annual acreage and crop production reports submitted by producers who elect to maintain eligibility for NAP payments. In geographic areas impacted by natural disasters, Service Centers assess and document area loss, perform loss appraisals upon receipt of loss notices, and issue payments to qualified producers.

To improve the efficiency and effectiveness of assistance provided, FSA is:

- Improving the management of crop loss information through the development of a common, web-based information management tool that can be shared by appropriate Federal, State, and local entities.
- Using geo-spatial data and tools to improve assessment of crop conditions and producer compliance with FSA programs.
- Working with Congress, State and local governments, other agencies, and private enterprises to develop better ways to meet customer long term needs.
- Automating the NAP program to improve program integrity and decrease workload for producers and Agency employees.

Performance Measures:

- Eligible commodity production placed under marketing assistance loan or loan deficiency payment (includes wheat, corn, barley, oats, grain sorghum, and soybeans)
  Baseline (FY1998): 77%
  Target (FY2005): 80%

- Eligible cotton production placed under marketing assistance loan or loan deficiency payment
  Baseline (FY1998): 85%
  Target (FY2005): 85%

- Average assessment for tobacco and peanuts
  Baseline (FY1999): Tobacco - $.03/lb; Quota Peanuts - $.00366/lb.; Non-Quota Peanuts - $.0011/llb
  Target (FY2005): Tobacco - ≤ $.08/lb; Quota Peanuts - $.00366/lb.; Non-Quota Peanuts - $.0011/lb

- Average price received for tobacco and peanuts
  Baseline (FY1999): Tobacco - $1.82/lb; Quota Peanuts - $610/ton; Non-Quota Peanuts - $175/ton.
  Target (FY2005): Tobacco - $1.70/lb;Quota Peanuts - $610/ton. Non-Quota Peanuts - $132/ton

- Eligible producers receiving NAP payment within 30 days of the producer's application for payment
  Baseline (FY2001): Will be available in FY 2002, based on timeliness of FY2001 payments.
  Target (FY2005): Target will be established once baseline data is available.

- Services offered electronically
  Baseline (FY1999): 0%
  Target (FY2005): 100%

Data Quality:
FSA does not have historic data that tracks the time from an individual producer's crop loss to the issuance of a NAP payment. In the previous strategic plan and annual performance plans, FSA measured the improvements in the amount of time needed to designate NAP areas and determine producer eligibility. With the elimination of the NAP 'area trigger' in crop year 2001, this measure is no longer relevant. Data for the performance measure tracking payment timeliness will be available at the end of crop year 2001.

Regarding the other performance measures, there are no known data limitations. Additionally, FSA is working to develop more outcome oriented performance measures that better reflect the impact our programs have on our customers. These new measures may require additional or improved measurement systems.

Program Evaluations:
Program evaluations, including cost-benefit analyses and outcome evaluations, are proposed in the years covered by this strategic plan. Results of the evaluations will be considered when developing future Agency strategic and annual performance plans.

Key Factors Affecting Goal Achievement:
There are many factors impacting FSA's ability to provide long-term income stability and timely disaster assistance for farmers and ranchers, including:

- continued low commodity prices resulting from abundant global food and fiber supplies;
- adverse weather conditions;
- lack of funding for developing and implementing proposed electronic program delivery initiatives;
- limitations of the existing programs; and
- the next Federal Farm Bill, anticipated to be completed in FY 2002, which could have a significant impact on the structure, implementation, and delivery of programs administered by FSA.

STRATEGIC GOAL 2

Assist agricultural producers and landowners achieve a high level of stewardship of soil, water, air, and wildlife resources on America's farmland and ranches while protecting the human and natural environment.

To help meet the USDA goal of maintaining and enhancing the nation's natural resources and environment, FSA offers assistance to farmers and ranchers through the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) and the Emergency Conservation Program (ECP). In addition to these programs, FSA helps to improve public health and the environment through the Hazardous Waste Management Program.
CRP is USDA's largest conservation program. The program encourages farmers to plant long-term resource-conserving covers to improve environmental quality, protect natural resources, and enhance habitat for fish and wildlife, including threatened and endangered species. CRP is a voluntary program offering landowners annual rental payments, incentive payments for certain activities, and cost-share assistance to establish approved cover in exchange for retiring environmentally sensitive land from production for 10-15 years. The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), Cooperative State Research and Education Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, State forestry agencies, and local soil and water conservation districts provide program support.

FSA also administers the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP), which is a recent enhancement of the CRP. CREP expands CRP's effectiveness by allowing FSA to work in partnership with States and local interests, targeting specific water quality, soil erosion, and wildlife habitat issues related to agricultural use. The program uses financial incentives to encourage farmers and ranchers to voluntarily enroll in 10-15 year contracts to remove land from agricultural production, ensuring lasting benefits.

ECP provides emergency funds to farmers and ranchers to assist in rehabilitating farmland damaged by natural disasters and for carrying out water conservation measures during periods of severe drought. ECP assistance helps ensure timely, quality restoration efforts. Restored farmland ensures continued production capabilities and protection of water, air, soil, and wildlife resources. NRCS provides technical assistance for ECP.

The Hazardous Waste Management Program, funded by CCC, provides alternative sources of safe drinking water and/or ground water remediation systems at former CCC grain storage facilities found to have groundwater contamination above the maximum allowable level. From the 1930's to 1970's CCC operated grain storage facilities at various locations nationwide (there were over 4,500 locations at the program's peak). Carbon tetrachloride was used at some locations to protect the grain from destructive insects. In 1985 the use of carbon tetrachloride was prohibited and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) assigned a maximum contaminant level to groundwater.

GOAL 2 OUTCOMES

- Reduce soil erosion.
- Reduce sedimentation in streams and lakes.
- Improve water quality.
- Establish wildlife habitat.
- Restore farmland damaged by natural disasters.
- Protect public health by reducing groundwater contamination.

Strategies:

- Maintain an enrollment of 36.4 million acres in CRP by conducting a regularly scheduled sign-up to enroll new acreage in the CRP and a continuous CRP sign-up to enroll environmental priority practice acreage.
- Prior to each sign up, evaluate and modify, if necessary, the environmental benefits index to ensure selected acreage offers the greatest environmental benefit.
- Target the conservation needs of State and local communities by accelerating funding through the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program.
- Continue working with local and State agencies and concerned groups to develop Conservation Reserve Enhancement Programs to address local area concerns on a watershed or other resource area. By working with other groups FSA can leverage the existing benefits of CRP with additional funding and other assistance from a variety of sources.
- Improve the CRP application process for producers by developing a web-based CRP application.
- Develop outcome measures for CRP to better show the impact the program has on environmental quality, protection of natural resources, and enhancement of fish and wildlife habitat. A description of this effort is included in the Data Quality section that follows.
- Conduct on-site investigations in a timely manner to assess the extent of farmland damage resulting from a natural disaster, helping to ensure that emergency assistance is provided to farmers as quickly as possible.
- Utilize Quicksite® investigation technology and implement irrigation sprinkler technology to improve the timeliness and cost-effectiveness of grain storage site investigations and remediation.

Performance Measures

- Total acreage enrolled in CRP
  Baseline (FY2000): 31,493,000 acres enrolled
  Target (FY 2006): 36,400,000 acres enrolled
- Acres of land enrolled in CRP that would require a conservation plan if cropped
  Baseline (FY 2000): 24,077,000 acres enrolled
  Target (FY 2006): 25,793,000 acres enrolled
- Acres enrolled in CRP likely to erode above "T"[1] when cropped in accordance with a conservation plan
  Baseline (FY 2000): 10,295,000 acres enrolled
  Target (FY 2006): 10,667,000 acres enrolled
- Acres in trees
  Baseline (FY 2000): 2,082,000 acres
  Target (FY 2006): 2,314,000 acres
- Acres enrolled in CRP in National and State conservation priority areas
  Baseline (FY 2000): 13,635,000 acres enrolled
  Target (FY 2006): 15,825,000 acres enrolled
- Acres enrolled in CRP with seeding mixes determined best suited for wildlife
  Baseline (FY 2000): 16,609,000 acres enrolled.
  Target (FY 2006): 20,409,000 acres enrolled
- Acres enrolled in CRP continuous signup
  Baseline (FY 2000): 1,231,000 acres enrolled
  Target (FY 2006): 4,000,000 acres enrolled
- Acres of restored wetlands
  Baseline (FY 2000): 1,500,000 acres
  Baseline (FY 2006): 1,900,000 acres
- Acres of damaged farmland rehabilitated
  Baseline (FY 1999): 4,900,000 acres rehabilitated
  Target (FY 2006): Not Available[2]
- Communities provided safe drinking water through remediation efforts
  Baseline (FY 2000): 3 communities
  Target (FY 2005): 3 communities

[1] "T" = The tolerable soil loss in tons per acre per year.

[2] Targets for future years are impossible to predict, since program activity is in response to the occurrence of natural disasters, of which the severity and frequency is not known until after the fact.

Data Quality:

CRP performance measures are primarily acreage-defined descriptions of the types or locations of the land enrolled or the vegetative covers or practices applied to the enrolled acreage. This information is developed primarily from the CRP contract file. The baseline acreage numbers are estimates for expected enrollment on September 30, 2000 (the end of FY 2000), which are derived from the monthly contract data summary for August 2000.

The continuous enrollment acreage targets are based on the goals of the Clean Water Action Plan and USDA's Conservation Buffer Initiative. General signup (non-continuous) enrollment for FY 2002 through FY 2006 is expected to have characteristics similar to those of acreage with CRP contracts that will expire during the FY 2002 to FY 2005 period and the land that would enter the program in the same period.

As indicated previously, outcome-based measures describing direct soil, water, or air quality parameters, or wildlife species numbers (e.g., soil organic and carbon content, chemical or nutrient concentration in water, particulate concentration and size conditions in air, and waterfowl and grassland bird species numbers) are not yet available for CRP. Thus, the acreage enrollment estimates serve as proxies (e.g., highly erodible lands for soil conservation, priority area enrollment and wetland restoration for water quality, and wildlife priority areas and habitat establishment for wildlife). FSA anticipates developing additional measures from the Conservation Reporting and Evaluation System and the National Resources Inventory databases. As the specific relationships between these measures and the direct parameters become better identified and quantified in the future, CRP performance measures will be significantly improved.

FSA will evaluate ECP statistical reports to determine the number of rehabilitated acres.

Program Evaluations:
FSA evaluates CRP bid files, CRP contract files, and reports generated by the Conservation Reporting and Evaluation System to determine the environmental benefits of CRP. Upon contract approval, the data is updated to reflect land use, land treatment, and environmental benefits. To help ensure program integrity, Service Centers conduct on-site spot checks and review producer files prior to annual payment issuance, to ensure conservation practices are maintained in accordance with program requirements.

Key Factors Affecting Goal Achievement:
- CRP is a voluntary program, therefore the characteristics of the lands enrolled depend upon which lands are offered for contract.
- Favorable market prices may not induce producers to retire cropland.
- Natural disasters or severe drought.
- Noncompliance with program provisions.
- Demand for enrollment may exceed authorized enrollment levels.
- Obtaining appropriations sufficient to provide cost-sharing assistance to rehabilitate farmlands damaged by natural disasters, and to continue remediation efforts at former CCC grain storage facilities.

STRATEGIC GOAL 3

Assist eligible individuals and families in becoming successful farmers and ranchers.

FSA farm loan programs are an important source of credit to small family farmers unable to obtain credit from conventional sources at reasonable rates and terms. Often, borrowers are beginning farmers who can't qualify for conventional loans because they have insufficient financial resources. FSA also helps established farmers who have suffered financial setbacks from natural disasters, or whose resources are too limited to maintain profitable farming operations. In recent years the demand for farm loans and loan guarantees has risen greatly. FSA provided over 37,000 loans and loan guarantees in 1999, totaling $3.8 billion. The 1997 Agriculture Resource Management Study indicates that 89 percent of FSA direct loan program borrowers and 82 percent of guaranteed loan program borrowers are considered small farms under the National Commission on Small Farms definition (a farm with less than $250,000 in total annual farm sales). Additionally, FSA targets a portion of its annual lending authority for beginning and socially disadvantaged farmers. In 1999, 18 percent of the lending volume went to beginning farmers and seven percent went to socially disadvantaged farmers.

FSA offers direct and guaranteed farm ownership and operating loans. Guaranteed loans are made by conventional agricultural lenders and guaranteed by the Agency for up to 95 percent of any loss. The lender is always responsible for servicing the borrower's account for the life of the loan. Applicants unable to qualify for a guaranteed loan may be eligible for a direct loan from FSA. Direct loans are made and serviced by FSA officials, who also provide borrowers with supervision and credit counseling. These programs are authorized by the Consolidated Farm and Rural Development Act of 1961 (P.L. 87-128), as amended.

Loan Program areas:

- **Farm Ownership Loans** (direct and guaranteed): Farm ownership loans made to purchase farmland, construct or repair buildings and other fixtures, develop farmland to promote soil and water conservation, or, for guaranteed loans, to refinance debt.
- **Operating Loans** (direct and guaranteed): Operating loans may be used to purchase items needed for a successful farm operation, including livestock, farm equipment, feed, seed, fuel, farm chemicals, repairs, insurance, and other operating expenses. Additionally, operating loans can be used to pay for minor improvements to buildings, costs associated with land and water development, family living expenses, and to refinance debts under certain conditions.

In addition to farm ownership and operating loans, FSA also offers **emergency loans** to restore or replace essential property, pay all or part of production costs associated with the disaster year, pay essential living expenses, reorganize the farming operation, and refinance debts. Emergency loans are available only as direct loans.

GOAL 3 OUTCOMES

- Improve economic viability of farmers and ranchers.
- Reduce losses in direct loan programs.
- Timely responses to loan making and servicing requests.
- Maximum financial and technical assistance to underserved groups to aid them in establishing and maintaining profitable farming operations.

Strategies:

- **Implement an Aggressive Supervised Credit Program:** The core of FSA's farm loan program is its supervised credit component. Unlike commercial lenders, FSA works closely with its borrowers to develop profitable operations. The Farm Assessment guides FSA and the borrower toward this goal. The Farm Assessment is essentially a long-range business plan that summarizes a producer's personal and business goals and develops a strategy to achieve these goals. FSA helps each producer develop a Farm Assessment and assists the borrower in implementing the changes stated in the plan.

- **Identify and Correct Borrower Performance Problems Promptly:** A critical element in minimizing losses in FSA's direct farm loan program is identifying problems early. Through frequent farm and office visits with the borrower, FSA closely monitors a borrower's actual performance compared with the borrower's plan, thus detecting variances that could lead to performance problems. Once these problems are detected, FSA has numerous tools available to prevent defaults and minimize losses.

- **Actively Market and Sell Inventory Properties:** If FSA acquires collateral from a producer, disposing of that property quickly is critical to minimizing losses. FSA closely tracks its inventory property and aggressively markets these properties for sale within its regulations.

- **Aggressively Monitor and Address Processing Problems:** FSA must provide assistance in a timely manner in order to help improve the economic viability of farmers and ranchers. Therefore, FSA is enhancing its management information systems with new capabilities for managers to track applications. Two new systems are now being deployed, Management of Agricultural Credit and Guaranteed Loan System. These systems will provide enhanced management reporting to monitor field office progress in processing applications. With this new information, FSA managers will be in a better position to allocate resources where needed.

- **Correct Staffing Deficiencies and Streamline Work Processes:** FSA is assessing its resource needs through workload studies. Using Delphi based statistical studies, FSA is identifying the staffing levels needed to fully perform its loan making and servicing functions. In addition to identifying resource shortages, these studies will assist in identifying resource heavy processes. FSA will focus its regulation and policy streamlining efforts on these resource heavy processes and will eliminate unnecessary tasks.

- **Continue Outreach Efforts:** FSA will continue to focus its outreach efforts towards minority and beginning farmers and increase the number of loans made to these groups. FSA provides assistance to these groups in greater amounts than commercial lenders, however, there is opportunity for improvement in this area. Also, FSA will continue working with commercial lenders to identify changes in the guaranteed loan program that would increase interest in lending to these groups through the guaranteed loan program. Furthermore, FSA will continue working with 1890 schools and other organizations to identify and assist minority farmers.

Performance Measures:

- Loss rate on direct loans
  Baseline (FY 1998): 5.4%
  Target (FY 2005): 4.7%

- Processing time for direct loans (days)
  Baseline (FY 2000): 46 days
  Target (FY 2005): 35 days

- Processing time for guaranteed loans (days)
  Baseline (FY 2000): 20 days
  Target (FY 2005): 15 days

- Direct loan borrowers whose accounts are past due
  Baseline (FY 1998): 16.3%
  Target (FY 2005): 13.3%

- Amount of program loans made or guaranteed to beginning and socially disadvantaged farmers
  Baseline (FY 2000): $993.3 million
  Target (FY 2005): $1.4 billion

Data Quality:

The direct and guaranteed loan volume and loss data originates from the Agency's financial accounting system. Loan transactions are entered daily by Agency Service Center staff and processed through the Agency's finance office. Since this data flows through the Agency's financial accounting system, it is subject to both internal and external audits. Application processing data are gathered through the Agency's information system. Again, Service Centers input and update the information to determine the length of time to process a loan request.

The guaranteed loan outstanding principal balance comes from reports received from lenders servicing the guaranteed loans. Lenders must submit these reports to the Agency twice each year. FSA Service Center staff receive these reports, input the data into the Agency's information system, and follow up with lenders to ensure all required reports are provided. FSA District, State, and National offices monitor this process as part of routine oversight to ensure the reports are received and entered.

Program Evaluations:

FSA conducts regular evaluations of field office activities to ensure proper internal controls and credit quality. Also, the Economic Research Service and FSA's Economic and Policy Analysis Staff frequently assess the extent to which direct and guaranteed loan programs are benefiting the intended farmers.

Key Factors Affecting Goal Achievement:

Many outcomes described above are subject to the natural and economic forces that make farming a high-risk venture. Widespread or prolonged natural disasters can significantly reduce farm production and, therefore, reduce net income. Also, substantial inflation in farm expenses or depressed commodity prices will have a similar effect. To mitigate these factors, FSA encourages farmers to use various risk management practices such as crop insurance, and marketing tools such as forward contracting.

Other external factors influencing the Agency's ability to achieve its goals are the availability of funding for travel, information system development, and resources at the State and county level. FSA works in partnership with community-based, social, and religious organizations, to provide outreach to targeted farmers.

STRATEGIC GOAL 4

Improve the effectiveness and efficiency of FSA's commodity acquisition, procurement, storage, and distribution activities to support domestic and international food assistance programs, and administer the U.S. Warehouse Act.

FSA's commodity operations include management of the U.S. Warehouse Act (USWA) and acquisition, procurement, storage and distribution of commodities. These activities help to achieve domestic farm program price support objectives, produce a uniform regulatory system for storing agricultural products, and ensure the timely delivery of food products acquired for domestic and international food assistance programs and market development programs.

The CCC Charter Act and the USWA govern FSA's warehouse activities. The CCC Charter Act requires CCC to utilize usual and customary channels of trade and commerce when purchasing, selling, warehousing, transporting, processing, and handling agricultural commodities. The USWA, enacted by Congress in 1916 and revised in November 2000, authorizes the Secretary of Agriculture to license warehouse operators, who store agricultural products, as well as qualified persons to sample, inspect, weigh, and grade agricultural products. Commercial warehouse operators who are either regulated by the USWA, or elect to enter into a storage agreement with CCC to store government-owned or producer-owned commodities pledged to CCC as loan collateral, are required to meet minimum financial standards and maintain physical warehouse facilities capable of handling and storing applicable agricultural commodities. As of September 28, 2000, there were over 1,100 current USWA warehouse licenses and 3,650 current CCC storage agreements.

FSA's procurement activities are governed by the: National School Lunch Act, Sections 6 (a) and (e), 13 and 17; Emergency Food Assistance Act of 1983, as amended; Agricultural Trade Development and Assistance Act of 1954 (Public Law 83-480, Titles II and III), as amended; Food for Progress Act of 1985, as amended; and the Agricultural Act of 1949, Section 416(b), as amended.

GOAL 4 OUTCOMES

- Increase the self-sufficiency of USWA examination operations.
- Purchase high quality commodities.
- Deliver commodities to customers on time.
- Provide the highest possible level of customer service.

Strategies:

- **Increase Efficiency and Effectiveness of Warehouse Examinations and Inventory Management:** To increase warehouse industry support for funding a higher percentage of examination operations, FSA is revising its examination procedures and increasing the use of technology in examinations, which results in more efficient, less time consuming, and less costly examinations. Additionally, a recent revision to the USWA authorizes Electronic Warehouse Receipts (EWRs) for all commodities allowing for additional efficiency improvements.

  EWR's provide a great example of successfully carrying out true e-commerce within the cotton industry and provide significant cost savings to both industry and government. The cotton industry estimates each EWR issued saves $5 to $15 per bale in direct labor and cost efficiencies gained from reduced paperwork and paper-flow. The cotton industry has experienced total savings of more than $225 million per year, allowing the industry to offer greater purchase prices for a producer's cotton. The USWA revision will provide other sectors of American agriculture with similar e-commerce tools and opportunities to become as successful as the cotton industry. Additionally, the USWA revision will allow for an increase in the customer base and service expansions, resulting in additional income to be generated from user fees.

  At the request of our customers, enhancements to the Cotton On-Line Processing System (COPS) are being developed to provide centralized loan redemption, loan issuance, and loan deficiency payment applications. Every bale that is placed under loan or presented for a loan deficiency payment will be monitored from loan disbursement until redemption, or through forfeiture and disposition by electronic sale via the Internet by CCC. Several COPS applications are currently available on the Internet allowing USDA to connect with cotton storing warehouse operators, EWR providers, and cotton merchants. These system applications allow warehouse operators, cotton merchants and shippers to access forfeiture and quarterly payments and invoices, including invoice certification, and allows CCC-owned cotton to be cataloged and offered for sale to buyers with online bidding, awarding, invoicing and transfer of title completed electronically.

To ensure protection of all depositors, including the U.S. government, against potential losses in quality and quantity of the stored commodities and to ensure compliance with USWA and CCC storage agreements, FSA personnel periodically make unannounced examinations of the facilities, commodities, and warehouse records. These examinations, supported by fees from the warehouse industry and CCC, provide the foundation for industry-wide confidence in the integrity of warehouse receipts and facilitate the orderly marketing of agricultural products.

- **Streamline and Improve Commodity Purchasing and Delivery:** FSA is implementing several initiatives that will result in more timely and cost-effective commodity purchasing and improve the timeliness of commodity deliveries to customers. One effort is to streamline procurement practices by utilizing long-term contracts and other alternative contracting methods such as negotiated bid and best value. Additionally, FSA is developing web-based applications to improve the timeliness and cost effectiveness of the procurement process by allowing vendors to submit electronic bids. These improvements reduce redundant data entry and data handling; provide vendors with timely and effective means of submitting bids; coordinate the evaluation of freight and commodity bids; automate the entry of commodity requests from AID, private voluntary organizations and FAS; and automate reporting, edits and data validation. These applications include:
  - Freight Electronic Bid Entry and Evaluation System
  - Food Aid Request Entry System
  - Electronic Bid Entry System
  - Domestic Electronic Bid Entry System

- **Ensure Procurement of High Quality Commodities:** To make quality the driving force behind Federal government food procurement, FSA will continue implementation and expansion of the Total Quality Systems Audit (TQSA). TQSA is a quality management initiative designed to ensure the quality of products provided to CCC for use in domestic and international food assistance. It is an alternative to traditional end-item food inspection used to verify that a supplier has the capability to produce a product which meets program requirements and needs. TQSA directs the emphasis of quality to the manufacturing process, rather than to the finished product characteristics.

- **Improve Customer Satisfaction:** FSA is developing a feedback mechanism for customer opinions that will be used to establish a database of current customer opinions on goods and services provided. This database will be used to analyze and identify areas for improvement and develop recommended courses of action.

Performance Measures

- CCC's contribution level associated with USWA total examination operations
  Baseline (FY 1996): 65%
  Target (FY 2005): 40%
- Lead-time associated with purchasing commodities
  Baseline: TBD
  Target (FY 2005): 5% reduction
- Per unit cost of commodity purchases
  Baseline: TBD
  Target (FY 2005): 5% reduction
- On-time shipments for multi food accounts
  Baseline (FY 1996): 80%
  Target (FY 2005): 95%
- Customer satisfaction with goods and services provided
  Baseline: TBD
  Target (FY 2005): TBD
- Distribute vendor payments in a timely and cost effective manner.
  Baseline: TBD
  Target (FY 2005): TBD

Data Quality:

- Warehouse Examinations and Inventory Management: Program managers use budget reports to measure performance and ensure that program costs do not exceed available funds. Commodity Operation's staff verifies Budget Division data through its own Warehouse Examination Work Progress Report, which provides the number of hours and applicable salaries involved in examinations. Kansas City Commodity Office personnel review warehouse examination results to verify that examinations are adequate to ensure that facilities licensed under the USWA meet storage and handling requirements.

- Commodity Purchasing and Delivery: Performance data is generated from the Processed Commodities Inventory Management System (PCIMS), and other similar systems for specific commodities to monitor program operations and ensure the Agency is meeting its goals. FSA and FNS senior management review PCIMS reports monthly and quarterly. FSA personnel verify systems data after entry.

- Customer Satisfaction: Reports measuring customer satisfaction will be generated from a database of customer opinions on goods and services. This information can be validated via regular customer information gatherings and focus groups. Feedback from participation in international, national, and local industry conferences will also be used to validate reports. The ability to obtain customer responses is impacted by the timeliness and approval by OMB on collecting data from our customers, and customers taking the time and effort to provide the information. Partner agencies for which FSA provides services must be willing and able to participate in this endeavor.

Program Evaluations:

FSA conducts regular evaluations of commodity operations to ensure proper internal controls and data quality. A recent analysis of FSA's commodity operations core business functions included direct feedback from hundreds of individual contacts representing multiple types of customers. Results of the analysis have been used by FSA to improve customer operations. In addition, FSA participates in, and hosts, industry-wide conferences where our services and operations are discussed, including discussion of suggested improvements to our operations.

Key Factors Affecting Goal Achievement:

External factors which may impact warehousing and inventory management performance include the increased workload and related inventory management costs from high levels of loan and loan deficiency payment participation. Additionally, increased USDA compliance review requirements could strain an already reduced workforce to the point that staffing and expenditures needed to make improvements would not be available. The warehouse industry's resistance to fund warehouse examinations and lack of support for the revised USWA would greatly delay or block any planned improvements. Efforts to mitigate these factors include revising warehouse examination procedures and increasing the use of automation to improve effectiveness, efficiency, and reduce the costs of operations. The availability of transportation, vendor production, performance problems, supply shortages, and size of shipments could impact FSA's ability to improve commodity purchasing and delivery. Sister agencies for which FSA provides services will also have to be willing and able to participate in this endeavor. FSA continues to expand partnership activities with sister agencies.

STRATEGIC GOAL 5

Provide effective administrative services and information technology processes.

FSA will develop information systems needed to allow customers to share data and receive services electronically via the Internet. Although FSA has many documents available on-line, many customers cannot file or submit information to USDA electronically. FSA will have secure electronic filing and retrieval systems in FY 2002 that will enable customers to file all required paperwork electronically and access all current publications over the Internet.

FSA will improve the quality, availability, and speed by which information is shared with the public, other Federal agencies, State and local Governments, and with private sector entities, such as banks and insurance companies. FSA will reduce duplication of information collection from farmers and ranchers and will increase the utility of information collected from customers.

FSA will have a financial information system that can produce auditable financial statements and provide reliable and useful information for decision-making. To meet the needs of our customers, financial management systems must process, track and provide accurate, timely, and accessible information on financial activity in the most cost-effective and efficient manner. These systems will support the basic accounting functions for accurately recording and reporting financial transactions, but also must support an integrated budget, financial, and performance information system that managers may use to make decisions on their programs. The baseline requirements for the integrated financial management system will also be used for financial system modifications needed to operate the Common Computing Environment platform in the USDA Service Centers.

FSA will fully implement the Debt Collection Improvement Act of 1996 (DCIA) to maximize collection of delinquent debts owed to the Government and ensure quick action to enforce recovery of debts through use of all DCIA collection tools.

FSA will provide a modern, efficient, and cost-effective procurement system and processes, in concert with our customers, to support the Farm and Foreign Agricultural Service mission area's programs.

FSA will implement an automated human resources system that increases customer satisfaction, improves timely support for program objectives, increases the usefulness and availability of human resources information for workforce planning and reporting purposes, and significantly decreases the resources required for personnel administration.

GOAL 5 OUTCOMES

- Improve customer service delivery to program managers, customers, and the public.
- Improve organizational performance and productivity of financial management systems and reporting, procurement, informational technology investments, and personnel services.

Strategies:

- Make investments to improve FSA's information technology infrastructure, so that program managers can design more efficient and effective program delivery modalities to meet the needs of customers and users, while protecting privacy and ensuring that systems are accessible and secure from unauthorized access or disruption. FSA will use web-enabled technologies, geospatial information systems, and telecommunications to support remote access to FSA services and processes via the Internet.

- Receive an unqualified audit opinion on CCC's financial statements annually. Ensure FSA and FAS financial statements are accurate and complete to support USDA's goal to achieve an unqualified audit on USDA's consolidated financial statements. In FY 2000, a contract was awarded to perform an independent validation and verification of CCC's foreign credit reform accounting, an area in which the Corporation has historically experienced deficiencies that affected the audit opinion received. The contract included a review of all credit reform accounting system transaction codes, and recommendations for changes to the accounting system to address various Office of Inspector General audit findings and recommendations. Additionally, the Chief Accountant, CCC, now approves changes in system transaction codes used for Credit Reform activities. The format and procedures for domestic program system changes will be modified to apply to credit reform as well.

- Develop an integrated financial management system for FSA and CCC (and FAS through cross servicing), which will include general ledger management, budget execution, funds control management, payment management, receipt management and financial reporting. Improve financial management reporting by using a FSA and CCC data warehouse to provide a single source for FSA and CCC data.

- Reduce outstanding delinquent domestic debts due to CCC, FSA, and FAS by limiting the number of new delinquencies, and reducing the cost to administer new debt collection tools and processes as required under DCIA.

- Establish a methodology that effectively measures cost of Agency operations to ensure effective and efficient management of Agency resources. FSA will use the cost accounting methodology to measure administrative and program delivery costs.

- Implement an Integrated Acquisition System pilot program to allow requisitions to be submitted via the Internet; institute commitment accounting in USDA which has an interface with the Foundation Financial Information System; and provide automated tools to prepare purchase orders, requests for quotations, solicitations and contracts.

- Work with the Natural Resources Conservation Service and Rural Development to implement PeopleSoft, a commercial off-the-shelf software product being implemented under the Consolidated Administrative Management Systems (CAMS) initiative. In FY 2002, the three Service Center agencies may be joined in implementing the system by other USDA agencies, including the Forest Service. In addition, a number of other USDA agencies are pilot testing commercial off-the-shelf software programs that may provide additional functionality and cost savings not available from a single vendor product.

- Use automated decision support tools for line managers and supervisors that reduce the need for administrative support from human resources staffs and reduce personnel administration costs. To implement these tools, preparatory work must be done to validate data in the system for access. The Kansas City Personnel Division will be expanding its special examining unit to provide services to other USDA agencies. This will provide an opportunity over the next five to ten years to review and validate a considerable amount of staffing and classification information that will be needed to support these automated decision support tools.

Performance Measures:

- All information technology program applications meet or exceed the access and service requirements of the Government Paperwork Elimination Act and the Freedom to E File Act while maintaining privacy and ensuring systems are secure from unauthorized access or disruption. (Yes/No)

- Type of audit opinion received on Commodity Credit Corporation financial statements
  Baseline: Qualified audit opinion received in FY 1999
  Target: Unqualified audit opinion in FY 2000, annually thereafter

- FSA and CCC delinquent domestic debts
  Baseline (FY 1999): 14,888 CCC/Farm Programs delinquent debts; 24,724 FSA/Farm Loan Program delinquent debts
  Target (FY 2005): Decrease delinquent debts by10%

- Administrative costs required for human resources administration.
  Baseline: Data will be developed during FY 2001.
  Target (FY 2005): Reduce personnel costs by 10%

Data Quality:

- Unauthorized intrusions or disruptions which affect data integrity, records or program delivery are available from security reports.
- USDA's Office of Inspector General issues an audit opinion on CCC's financial statements annually.
- The volume of delinquent debts is reported annually to the Treasury Department on the SF-220.9 Report on Receivables Due from the Public.
- Data on administrative costs for human resources will be collected and measured through FSA's Activity Based Costing system.

Program Evaluations:
The Office of Inspector General audits the CCC financial statements annually, the findings and recommendations are considered during development of FSA planning documents. Additionally, the General Accounting Office is evaluating CCC/FSA and Rural Development compliance with DCIA during FY 2001. Findings from this evaluation will also be considered in future planning documents.

Key Factors Affecting Goal Achievement:
A number of external factors may significantly impact the ability of the USDA Service Center agencies to meet the goals and outcomes of CAMS. These include:

- The replacement of the payroll engine at the National Finance Center during the period FY 2002 to FY 2003 may create system incompatibilities with CAMS and other Departmental systems that are being pilot tested. It is possible that the National Finance Center could select a payroll engine and complementary software/database systems that may require client agencies to use alternative front-end systems.

- The quality and capabilities of off-the-shelf human resources software available commercially during the next three to five years may change significantly. This may increase FSA's ability to meet its objectives in the long run, but may delay short-term achievements if shifts in acquisition and implementation strategies are required.

- Funds and resources for the further implementation and enhancement of CAMS may not be available after FY 2001. As CAMS is funded annually on a tri-mission area basis, and on a discretionary basis as well, budget considerations are paramount. In addition, as there is the possibility of additional funding from other USDA agencies (e.g. Forest Service), the amount of funds available have a significant and direct impact on the ability to meet or even exceed the performance targets established.

STRATEGIC GOAL 6

To ensure equal access and treatment in program delivery and employment, provide a diverse workforce free of discrimination, and ensure equal opportunity for minority, women-owned, and small disadvantaged businesses.

FSA is firmly committed to the elimination of any and all forms of disparate or discriminatory treatment affecting its customers, clients, and employees based on consideration of race, color, national origin, religion, sex, age, disability, marital status, and sexual orientation. This includes program applicants, recipients, and beneficiaries; employees and applicants for employment; and private sector individuals or organizations who do, or who seek to do, business with the Agency. Overall, the Agency's strategy is to seek, encourage, and facilitate full participation of *all* farmers and ranchers in its available programs through outreach efforts; to become an *employer of choice* that recruits, retains, rewards, and promotes a diverse workforce based on considerations of merit and fairness; and to become a strong promoter of *entrepreneurship* for minority, women-owned, and small disadvantaged businesses who are capable of providing products and services that are needed for conducting the Agency's programs.

GOAL 6 OUTCOMES

- Reduce under-representation of women, minority groups, and the disabled in Agency employment, occupational categories, and grade levels.
- Deliver Agency programs in full compliance with applicable civil rights laws, and Departmental goals, policies, and procedures.
- Meet or exceed Departmentally established goals for acquisition of products and services from minority, women-owned, and small disadvantaged businesses.
- Establish baselines and additional metrics for measurement of the Agency's progress in meeting its civil rights and equal opportunity goals.

Strategies:

General -- Use the Administrator's civil rights performance goals, as approved by the USDA Office of Civil Rights, as a basis for planning, implementing, and tracking projects and actions that are of particular interest to the Department.

Equal Employment Opportunity Strategies

- Use the Agency's annual Affirmative Employment Plan to:
  - -- Identify barriers to reducing under-representation.
  - -- Develop and implement appropriate plans for overcoming or eliminating such barriers.
  - -- Assess the effectiveness of Agency efforts.
- Provide top Agency management with monthly report cards that indicate progress at all organizational levels in eliminating under-representation in the workforce.
- Within available ceiling constraints, reallocate personnel ceilings to particular occupational categories based on program need, but targeted for special national efforts to eliminate under-representation in such categories.
- Use special programs and appointment authorities, such as the 1890 Scholars Program, the HACU Summer Intern Program, the Cooperative Education Program, and Workforce Recruitment for College Students with Disabilities, for outreach purposes.
- Use internally and externally sponsored career enhancement programs to increase the educational, experiential, and skill levels of the workforce, with special emphasis on improving opportunities for under-represented groups.
- Use special emphasis programs sponsored by USDA and other agencies to increase employee awareness and appreciation of the history and cultural backgrounds of minority groups and women.
- Provide effective equal employment opportunity and civil rights training for all employees, State and county committee members, and volunteers to improve awareness, understanding, and appreciation of requirements for nondiscrimination, workforce diversity, and the avoidance of sexual

harassment.

- Develop a workforce with the ability to resolve conflicts through non-adversarial means, when appropriate, in order to increase productivity, foster a more positive work environment, and utilize more funds for employee recognition and program delivery.
- Increase the use of "alternative dispute resolution" techniques to provide quicker, more satisfactory, and less costly resolutions of employment conflicts.

Program Delivery Strategies

- Identify, assess, and address the research, education, and technical assistance needs of minority low-income and under-served customers.
- Establish partnerships with minority serving institutions, community based organizations, and other agencies to provide information on Agency programs and County Committee elections, and to improve service delivery to under-served populations.
- Identify and take appropriate actions, within the Agency's authority, to overcome or eliminate barriers and increase program participation by and service delivery to under-served groups.
- Carry out management reviews of Federally conducted programs in a timely, complete, and impartial manner. Implement corrective actions on a timely basis to address weaknesses identified in compliance reviews and prevent recurrence.
- Conduct timely and effective Civil Rights Impact Analyses of program regulations.
- Increase the use of "alternative dispute resolution" techniques, such as the USDA-Certified State Mediation Program, to achieve satisfactory resolution of issues at the earliest possible time and at the lowest possible level.

Equal Opportunity in Business Relations

- Identify, assess, and address obstacles encountered by minority, women-owned, and small disadvantaged businesses that would like to provide products and services to support Agency programs.
- Identify and use appropriate communications and publicizing methods to assure that minority, women-owned, and small disadvantaged businesses are easily and readily able to learn of business opportunities with the Agency.
- Work with the USDA Office of Civil Rights and other Departmental offices to develop and achieve ambitious and attainable goals for acquiring products and services from minority, women-owned, and small disadvantaged businesses, including small, HubZoned, and certified 8(a) businesses.
- Train Agency acquisition staff in procurement from minority, women-owned, and small disadvantaged businesses.
- Regularly attend fairs and conferences sponsored by the Small Business Administration (SBA) and the USDA Office of Small and Disadvantaged Business Utilization.
- Hold meetings with minority, women-owned, and small disadvantaged businesses to interest them in placement on the Agency's bidder's list for acquisition of mission area products and services.
- Within the legal requirements of applicable contracting and acquisition management laws and regulations, assist minority, women-owned, and small disadvantaged businesses with their questions, issues, and concerns related to legal and technical requirements for preparing and submitting bids, managing government contracts, and other matters of mutual concern. Refer questions that are complex or require extensive resources or training to SBA or other appropriate agencies.

Performance Measures:

- Representation of Hispanic and Asian Pacific employees in the workforce. [*Note*: These are the only categories of employees for which there is under-representation in overall Agency employment at the present time.]
  Baselines (FY 1999): Hispanic – 2.9%; Asian-Pacific – 0.8%
  Targets (FY 2005): Hispanic – 6.0%; Asian-Pacific – 2.5%

- Representation of minority groups and women at higher Agency grade-levels [GS-13 through GS-15, excluding political appointees (for which the Agency does not have appointment authority)].
  Baselines (FY 1999): Minorities – 16.5%; Women – 28.3%
  Targets (FY 2005): Minorities – 17%; Women – 35%
  [*Note*: FY 2005 target for minorities equals their relevant civilian labor force percentages; FY 2005 target for women is an interim goal that is below their relevant civilian labor force percentage.]

- Equal Employment Opportunity compliance corrective actions implemented within 90 days.
  Baseline (FY 1999): 95%
  Target (FY 2005): 100%

Data Quality:

Workforce diversity and under-representation data are contained in automated databases maintained by the Department's National Finance Center and by the Combined Administrative Management System (CAMS).

Program Evaluations:

A number of civil rights and equal employment opportunity evaluations have been completed recently. Findings and recommendations included in the evaluations were considered during development of this strategic plan. Also, the Agency's Civil Rights and Small Business Utilization Staff plans to evaluate data obtained from its own management reviews of FSA programs. Data from all internal reviews will be compiled to identify trends and recurring issues, and to assess/verify the implementation of scheduled corrective actions, including the achievement of desired results.

Key Factors Affecting Goal Achievement:

- Budget constraints and personnel ceiling limitations may significantly impact the Agency's ability to hire new employees, particularly recruitment from external sources.
- The rate of retirement of eligible employees and other factors affecting employee turnover rates may either dampen or accelerate the ability of the Agency to diversify its workforce in appropriate areas and to reduce under-representation at higher-grade levels.
- The passage of pending Congressional legislation regarding the employment status of the non-Federal county office workforce may impact overall accountability for improving program services to under-served populations and in reducing under-representation in employment.

LINKAGE OF STRATEGIC GOALS TO ANNUAL PERFORMANCE PLAN

As part of FSA's annual budget request, an annual performance plan will be developed. The annual performance plan will contain specific, measurable annual performance goals and indicators linked to the strategic goals and outcomes identified in the strategic plan. The annual plan will also identify the resources needed to accomplish the performance goals. Many of the performance measures in the strategic plan will be used in the annual performance plan. However, the annual performance plan may contain additional measures to show performance in a given year. Often, these additional measures will be outputs, or intermediate outcomes, indicating incremental progress towards achievement of the long-term goals and strategies.

RESOURCES NEEDED

To accomplish the goals and outcomes identified in the strategic plan and to ensure customers receive high quality service, FSA must have adequate funding for training and technology. Properly trained staff, supported by a modernized information technology infrastructure, is needed to ensure efficient, cost-effective operations.

ROLE OF EXTERNAL ENTITIES

This document was developed internally by Agency employees. No outside facilitation was involved. Customer and stakeholder input was not obtained specifically for this strategic plan revision. However, Agency management and employees have held numerous meetings and focus groups with customers and stakeholders since the original strategic plan was published in 1997. Feedback from these sessions, as well as information from various reports such as Office of Inspector General and General Accounting Office identified management challenges and the findings and recommendations in the Civil Rights Action Team's report on "Civil Rights at the U.S. Department of Agriculture", was included in this strategic plan revision.