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[Patrick McLoughlin](#)
National FOIA/PA Officer
United States Department of Agriculture
Natural Resources Conservation Service
375 Jackson St., Suite 600
St. Paul, MN 55101
Email: nrcs-foia@wdc.usda.gov

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United States Department of Agriculture
Natural Resources Conservation Service

February 21, 2017

RE: Your Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request, 2017-NRCS-02122-F

This letter responds to your Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request, tracking number **2017-NRCS-02122-F**, dated **February 06, 2017**, which was received at NRCS on **February 14, 2017**. You requested the following information:

“I request a digital/electronic copy of the meeting minutes for the National Food and Agriculture Council (NFAC) for meetings during the calendar years 2013, 2014, 2015 and 2016. (Date Range for Record Search: From 2/14/2013 To 2/14/2016)”

A total of ten pages of records responsive to your request were identified. All ten pages are being released to you in full. Portions of certain pages have been withheld in part pursuant to Exemption (b)(5) of the FOIA.

The following information provides justifications and precedent for our withholding of information under the applicable FOIA exemption:

Pre-decisional and Deliberative Process Privilege – Exemption 5 U.S.C. §552(b)(5)

Exemption (b)(5) of the FOIA protects “inter-agency or intra-agency memorandums or letters which would not be available by law to a party other than in litigation with the agency.” The Agency records that are subject to protection in full or in part under Exemption 5 are pre-decisional and/or deliberative.

As a threshold matter, the responsive records must be inter-agency or intra-agency documents in order to be protected from disclosure under Exemption (b)(5). Further, to come within the scope of Exemption (b)(5), the responsive records must fall within the coverage of a privileged record in litigation. The deliberative process privilege is one of the litigation privileges that may be invoked under Exemption (b)(5) in order to withhold responsive information. This Exemption of the FOIA protects the “decision making

processes of government agencies.” *NLRB v. Sears Roebuck & Co.*, 421 U.S. 132, 150 (1975); *see also Missouri ex rel. Shorr v. U.S. Army Corps of Eng’rs*, 147 F.3d 708, 710 (8th Cir. 1998) (“The purpose of the deliberative process privilege is to allow agencies freely to explore alternative avenues of action and to engage in internal debates without fear of public scrutiny.”)

You have the right to appeal this determination. Any appeal must be in made in writing to the Assistant Secretary for Administration, USDA, 1400 Independence Avenue, S.W., Whitten Bldg. 209-A, Washington D.C. 20250-0103 and received within 90 days from the date of this letter. Placing the phrase “FOIA APPEAL” in capital letters on the front of the envelope and in the subject heading of the letter facilitates the processing of any appeal.

The appellant authority for adverse decision made by the National FOIA Officer, is the NRCS FOIA Public Liaison, Philip Buchan.

Philip Buchan
NRCS FOIA Public Liaison
1-1112A
5601 Sunnyside Avenue
Beltsville, MD 20705
(202)617-0802

Based on an adverse action, you also have the right to seek dispute resolution services from the FOIA Public Liaison of the agency or the Office of Government Information Services (<https://ogis.archives.gov/>).

Sincerely,



Patrick McLoughlin
USDA-NRCS/National FOIA/PA Officer

Enclosed

National Food and Agriculture Council (NFAC) Meeting May 30, 2013

Jason Weller, NFAC Chair and Acting Chief, NRCS chaired the meeting. Jason opened up the meeting with introductions and gave a brief overview regarding office actions.

Signage: Carolyn Parker, Director, Office of Advocacy and Outreach, presented information on Receipt for Service, authorized in the 2008 Farm Bill. It is voluntary right now—USDA is not required to provide the receipt unless the producer asks. However, if a producer comes into an office and makes a request, field staff will need to be knowledgeable of the information. If producers have a complaint they have a receipt for service documenting the service. The posters need to be put up in the offices and easily visible to producers with field staff offering the receipts for service. Department Regulation 4370-002 establishes the procedures and policy for FSA, NRCS, and RD to issue a receipt, upon request, for each benefit or service sought by any inquirer, applicant, or customer, and to note the action taken or recommended to be taken. The Office of Advocacy and Outreach maintains a toll-free telephone number to allow an inquirer, applicant, or customer to report failure to comply. Agencies are required to display an informational poster or some type of signage in offices that provide the toll-free number. Compliance with this regulation is not only a law, but is the right thing to do. Chief Weller invited Carolyn Parker to an upcoming State Conservationists Video Teleconference (VTC) to discuss Receipt for Service.

Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP): Mark Rose, EQIP Team Leader, NRCS discussed EQIP including the environmental benefits of the program highlighted before and after slides of some EQIP practices. Additionally, a YouTube video showcasing the benefits of EQIP in diverse agriculture near Atlanta, Georgia was presented <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qNzcdmml1UU>. The EQIP is a voluntary program that provides financial and technical assistance to agricultural producers through contracts. These contracts provide financial assistance to help plan and implement conservation practices that address natural resource concerns and for opportunities to improve soil, water, plant, animal, air and energy resource concerns on agricultural land and non-industrial private forestland. In addition, the purpose of EQIP is to help producers meet Federal, State, Tribal and local environmental regulations.

Feds Feed Families: Julie Henderson, Director, Country of Origin Labeling Division, AMS and a USDA Champion for Feds Feed Families this year provided information on the rollout of Feds Feed Families (FFF) campaign, now just getting underway. Through Feds Feed Families Federal workers provide food for Food Banks. This year, the USDA will lead the campaign for all Federal agencies in which Douglas Keeler (AMS) has been selected to serve as the National Program Manager. Last year's National Program Manager, Duane Williams, will serve as the USDA Chair. Mr. Williams, along with his team of Champions and Chairs, will strive to beat USDA's contributions last year of 2.7 million pounds of food and non-perishable items.

This year's FFF campaign will run from June 1 through August 28, 2013. All agencies, including field components, are asked to participate in the campaign. Since 85% of the Federal workforce lives outside the Washington, D.C. area, contributions gathered will be serving communities in every state. In the coming days, agencies will be asked to identify Captains who will oversee collection logistics, weigh and report donation amounts, and coordinate donation pickups for their agencies. Tentative donation pickup dates are June 26, July 31, and August 28, 2013.

The nation's food banks and food pantries suffer during the summer months as donations drop and kids do not have a school lunch program. FFF is a big help in closing that gap. In the last 4 summers, the Federal workforce has collected an astounding 15.2 million pounds of food and non-perishable items. Contributions have increased significantly over the past 4 summers: 2009 – 1 million pounds; 2010 – 1.7 million pounds; 2011 – 5.7 million pounds; and 2012 – 7.2 million pounds. The goal this year is simply to “beat your best”! Agencies are encouraged to make the food drive fun; hold friendly competitions, consider luncheons and invite speakers, or encourage donations at meetings and picnic events. Collection boxes are available now and will be distributed through the USDA headquarters complex.

The official FFF kickoff will be on June 11, 2013 at the Capital Area Food Bank. More information will be forthcoming.

Q&As/Round Table: Cathie McCullough, Deputy Administrator, AMS Compliance & Analysis, mentioned the USDA Farmers Market opening ceremonies will be held on June 7th at 9:45. Acting Deputy Secretary Scuse will give opening remarks with the new AMS Administrator, Anne Alonzo.

National Food and Agriculture Council (NFAC) Meeting September 12, 2013

Jason Weller, NFAC Chair and Chief, NRCS chaired the meeting. Jason opened up the meeting and welcomed everyone. He briefly mentioned the great work we all do while operating under current budget realities. He pointed out that since January 1st, NFAC has reviewed and approved over 30 office actions that support USDA's effort to reduce spending, streamline operations and cut costs.

StrikeForce Initiative for Rural Growth and Opportunity: Max Finberg, Senior Advisor to the Assistant Secretary for Administration and Coordinator for the StrikeForce Initiative for Rural Growth and Opportunity provided a brief overview and update regarding StrikeForce. Rural Americans face many unique challenges and every day, the U.S. Department of Agriculture provides assistance to help rural communities prosper. Unfortunately, 85 percent of America's persistent poverty counties are in rural America. In 2010, USDA launched the StrikeForce for Rural Growth and Opportunity – an effort to leverage partnerships in poverty-stricken rural areas to ensure that every community has equal access to USDA programs. USDA piloted the StrikeForce initiative in 2010 in the states of Arkansas, Georgia and Mississippi. In 2011, StrikeForce expanded to the Southwest, adding Colorado, New Mexico and Nevada. In 2013, Secretary Vilsack announced new efforts to bring the StrikeForce for Rural Growth and Opportunity to Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, North Carolina, North Dakota, South Carolina, South Dakota, Texas, Utah and Virginia.

The results have already been impressive. For example, Farm Service Agency loans in StrikeForce areas were up almost 10 percent in 2012 over 2011 - even when the nation as a whole saw farm lending drop 10 percent. In the Natural Resource Conservation Service, program application by underserved producers last year increased by 82 percent in StrikeForce areas. Rural Housing loans were up more than 110 percent in 2012 over 2011 in StrikeForce areas. For more information as well as success stories regarding StrikeForce, visit the following site: http://www.usda.gov/wps/portal/usda/usdahome?navid=STRIKE_FORCE

Promise Zones Initiative: Joani Walsh, Deputy Under Secretary, Marketing and Regulatory Programs provided information on the Promise Zones Initiative. Under this initiative, federal government invests and partners with high-poverty urban, rural, and tribal communities to create jobs, increase economic activity, improve educational opportunities, leverage private investment, and reduce violent crime. The Promise Zones designation creates a mechanism for the federal government to partner with local leaders who are addressing multiple community revitalization challenges with on-the-ground technical assistance to help navigate federal programs and regulations. This approach includes working with local leadership, and bringing to bear the resources of a number of the President's signature revitalization initiatives from the Department of Education (ED), the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the Department of Agriculture, and the Department of Justice (DOJ), to ensure that federal programs and resources support the efforts to turn around 20 of the highest poverty urban, rural and tribal communities across the country. For more information on Promise Zones, visit the following site: <http://www.rurdev.usda.gov/CEDP-PZ.html>

Poverty Targeting: Tara Rice, Special Assistant, Rural Development (RD) presented their use of a census tract map to identify pockets of poverty throughout the United States and systematically target our resources to these high poverty places. This is a good example of data-driven decision making at the Department of Agriculture. RD created a set of goals to help track progress and ensure we increase investments into these high poverty areas. The national goals are an increase to 18% by 2014, 19% by 2015, and 20% by 2016.

Blueprint for Stronger Service: Chris Nelson, Administrative Solutions Project Lead presented information on the 4 priority areas (OWCP, Strategic Sourcing, Administrative Marketplace and Space Utilization). He highlighted the savings and that USDA continues to explore areas where more can be done. He recognized the role of NFAC to help meet the need for improved communication with the field and States—communication that is two-way dialogue to provide information and receive feedback. Chris also mentioned the effort underway to improve efficiency of the 1010 process as well as reevaluating reimbursable agreements in identifying areas of overlap and duplication. For more information on Blueprint for Stronger Service, Visit the following site:
http://www.usda.gov/wps/portal/usda/usdahome?contentid=blueprint_for_stronger_service.html

National Food and Agriculture Council (NFAC) Meeting December 17, 2013

Jason Weller, NFAC Chair and Chief, NRCS chaired the meeting. Jason opened up the meeting and welcomed everyone.

StrikeForce Initiative for Rural Growth and Opportunity: Max Finberg, Senior Advisor to the Assistant Secretary for Administration and Coordinator for the StrikeForce Initiative for Rural Growth and Opportunity provided a brief overview and update regarding StrikeForce for 2014. The Initiative is being expanded to four new states in calendar year 2014; Kentucky, Louisiana, Tennessee, and West Virginia. The Secretary will carry out an announcement on January 17th in Kentucky that will serve as an official launch of activities for 2014. Once details are available for that announcement, states will be notified so they can move forward with carrying out amplification events in their states. Amplification events would include USDA agencies, local media, partners, and others as appropriate.

As FSA assumes the leadership of the NFAC in 2014, so shall they be the agency leading StrikeForce at the Headquarters and State Offices. Each State Executive Director will serve as the StrikeForce Chair and shall designate an employee that will serve as the State Lead and will work collaboratively with Coordinators from other USDA Agencies to plan outreach events, workshops, meetings, and carry out reporting responsibilities.

Results that have recently been tallied from the last 3 fiscal years that the Initiative has been in effect tell a very powerful story. USDA has invested a total of \$9.67 billion since FY 2011 in StrikeForce target areas. This includes a total of \$2.7 billion just in FY 2013. For more information as well as success stories regarding StrikeForce, visit the following site: http://www.usda.gov/wps/portal/usda/usdahome?navid=STRIKE_FORCE

Regional Climate Hubs for Risk Adaptation and Mitigation to Climate Change: Dr. Ann Bartuska, Deputy Under Secretary for Research Economics and Education and William Hohenstein, Director of the Climate Change Program Office provided an overview of the effort to establish Regional Climate Hubs for Risk Adaptation and Mitigation to Climate Change. Last June, Secretary Vilsack outlined his vision for agricultural solutions to environmental challenges at the Washington Press Club. He announced the creation of seven Regional Climate Hubs, new research tools, and uniform policy guidelines to help producers mitigate climate threats, and adapt for the future. The June announcement marked the opening of an internal, competitive process among USDA facilities to apply to serve as their region's Climate Hub. The Hubs will represent centers of regional networks on climate science, forecasting impacts, and outreach to support decision-making related to climate change in agricultural and forestry communities around the country.

The Hubs will maintain a robust network of public, academic, and private sector organizations, researchers, and outreach specialists. They will deliver technical support to USDA land management program delivery by providing tools and strategies for climate change response to help producers cope with challenges associated with drought, heat stress, excessive moisture, longer growing seasons, and changes in pest pressure. The Hubs will also provide periodic regional assessments of risk and vulnerability in the production sector to contribute to the National Climate Assessment, and deliver and interpret regional climate change forecasts for hazard and adaptation planning. Notably, the Hubs will provide outreach and extension to farmers, ranchers, and forest landowners on science-based risk management to cope with biotic and abiotic risks exacerbated by a changing climate, and will partner with universities, Extension, and the private sector to create and deliver regional material.

NFAC Transition: As of January 1st, the Farm Service Agency (FSA) assumed the NFAC Chairperson responsibilities for 2014.

National Food and Agriculture Council Quarterly Meeting Minutes

April 25, 2016

Jason Weller, NFAC Chairperson, opened up the meeting with a welcome and briefly discussed NFAC priorities for CY2016 including:

- Communication and coordination with SFACs on leasing actions and other office related matters submitted through SFACs
- IT cost and service issues common to the SCAs
- Service First authority implementation
- Leasing Center of Excellence implementation
- Greenbook/Working Capital Fund investment costs and effectiveness
- Service Center Information Management Systems (SCIMS), "Partners", and Office Information Profile issues
- USDA Client Gateway common portal for on-line business by customers with agencies
- Data sharing needs and opportunities
- Vehicle fleet leasing, management, and sharing

Dr. Parham discussed USDA leasing. Now only 50 holdovers. In 2014 there were more than 1700. Also mentioned the kick-off of the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey.

My Brother's Keeper (BMK) – Tory Powell

My Brother's Keeper is a program launched by President Obama that aims to address persistent barriers to equality of opportunity that confront young men and boys of color. It seeks to give more young men the support they need to make good choices, to be resilient, to overcome obstacles, and achieve their dreams.

There are now nearly 250 communities in all 50 states that have accepted the President's My Brother's Keeper Community Challenge, committing to launching Local Action Plans to address opportunity gaps. Going forward, the White House and federal agencies will work to lift up successes (through mechanisms such as Champions of Change), track and encourage progress, and ensure communities have access to information about federal resources and initiatives.

More than \$600 million in grants and in-kind resources have been independently committed to advance the mission of MBK, including investments in safe and effective schools, mentoring programs, juvenile justice reforms, and school redesign. The White House will continue to call the private sector to action and continue to explore public-private partnerships to support policy goals.

USDA's story has been a combination of approaches including our participation in Generation-Indigenous. Our expansion of our Forest Service's 21st Century Conservation Corps and our efforts to expand Summer Youth Employment through our partnerships with the US Conference of Mayors. We have also worked with OPM to fully utilize the pathways hiring authority as a diversity recruitment tool.

Since 2015 the US Department of Agriculture has sought to provide opportunities for young people to successfully enter the workforce through internships and entry level positions in this time period we have provide this opportunity to over 360 young people with an over 60% diversity rate

Bridges To Opportunity – Glenn Schafer

Secretary Vilsack challenged FSA to leverage its footprint, knowledge of local agriculture, network of established partnerships, and reliable service to customers. Pilot conducted in 5 States, through 12 offices in 2015. Successful pilot paved way for Phase 2 expansion. In 20 States, through 200 plus offices, beginning April 2016. Using Software as a Service by Salesforce.com.

Although limited, the pilot established that FSA has the capacity to deliver additional resources through its County Office system. A briefing and demo was provided to the Secretary recently and he was pleased. He wants to see Bridges expanded, as it represents model government that works to meet the needs of its customers.

FSA invites all USDA agencies and offices to offer their information for dissemination to customers through Bridges. FSA also want to collaborate with all of USDA to develop topic-specific bundles of information that will help address the needs of farmers and ranchers. FSA has begun monthly USDA steering committee meetings for Bridges to Opportunity to ensure FSA remains focused on the prevailing needs of customers in Rural America.

Finally, FSA Administrator Val Dolcini provided a memo to all NFAC members that contained suggested verbiage for individual USDA agencies to send to their employees about Bridges to Opportunity.

StrikeForce – Luther Jones

In conjunction with the National Food and Agriculture Council, USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service now leads the StrikeForce for Rural Growth and Opportunity Initiative collaborative effort. In 2016, Secretary Tom Vilsack expanded the StrikeForce areas to include Florida (36 counties), Ohio (11 counties), Missouri (46 counties), and Montana (13 counties). Now, the StrikeForce Initiative covers persistent poverty counties in 25 States and Puerto Rico.

The USDA StrikeForce Team has assisted in the development and review of the 2015 Departmental StrikeForce Report. NRCS, RD and FSA provided programmatic and financial training opportunities that will help to improve the economy and quality of life of producers in StrikeForce counties in the states of AL, LA, and SC. The partnership will lead to significant energy savings to farmers and ranchers as well as support local economies in rural America.

To help improve the economy and quality of life in rural America, the StrikeForce Team is leading a multi-agency effort that maximize USDA support in StrikeForce counties in the four new States designated in 2016. The Team is developing a training agenda, power point presentation and a program matrix that outlines leveraging potential through NRCS, RD, FSA, AMS and FNS programs.

StrikeForce Team is developing a multi-state cross training and guidance for RD, NRCS and FSA employees on implementing StrikeForce successfully in 2016 and beyond. The purpose of the training is to provide history of the program, ways to implement projects collaboratively while working with partnering agencies and rural communities

FSIS Pilot – Roberta Wagner

USDA Office Space Pilot project Report to date April 20, 2016 - Summary

In March 2016 there were seven total visits:

- 1 FSA El Paso, TX
- 1 FSA Dodge County, WI
- 1 RD Bozeman, MT
- 2 FSA Bozeman, MT
- 1 FSA Great Falls, MT
- 1 NCRS Great Falls, MT

To April 20, 2016 there were four total visits:

- 1 RD Missoula, MT
- 1 RD Bozeman, MT
- 1 NCRS Great Falls, MT
- 1 FSA Bozeman, MT

All FSIS pilot participants report

- Successful contact with Points of Contact provided by the SFAC members by email or phone
- Prompt responses by POCs
- Readily available space
- Ease to find the USDA service center addresses
- Use of space for a few hours on the requested day to conduct computer work and phone calls
- Able to obtain excellent internet connection with FSIS issued MiFi.
- Comfortable, quiet, very adequate provision of desk and chair
- Conclusion that the space and accommodation provided by the hosts met all their needs

Further, five Mississippi FSA offices and one Louisiana FSA office are being used on a temporary basis for office space use by FSIS inspectors since Catfish inspection was implemented on March 1, 2016. There have been no reported problems.

The reception by each host in each office, along with the dedication by the Texas, Wisconsin, Montana, Mississippi and Louisiana SFACs to allow access to these pilot offices has allowed these visits by FSIS to demonstrate success of the goals of our pilot. The FSIS Pilot Work Group coordinators, Abeni Ogun and Ronald Nida (b) (5)

(b) (5)

Chairperson recommended that NRCS, FSA, RD and FSIS schedule a separate meeting to discuss the results of the pilot and the recommendation to expand nationwide.

Meeting adjourned

**National Food and Agriculture Council
Quarterly Meeting Minutes**

August 31, 2016

Welcome – Jason Weller, NFAC Chairperson

Ombudsperson Update (handouts) – Joanne Dea

Role of the Ombudsperson is to listen to concerns about access to USDA programs, identifies shared concerns and reports issues to USDA leaders, and makes recommendations to improve access and create systemic change. Office was established to contribute to systemic change and improve access to USDA programs for historically underserved farmers and ranchers.

(b) (5)

Dr. Gregory Parham

Commended agencies on responsiveness regarding the email treat to USDA agencies in several locations. Security assessment is ongoing with a visible presence at the designated offices. Secretary was briefed and engaged throughout the process.

Leasing Accountability and Strategy Division Report – Over 90 leases across USDA have been eliminated. USDA currently posting positions to hire staff for managing leases. Continue to eliminate holdover leases and GSA is partnering in this process.


Service First Authority (handout) – Chris Nelson

(b) (5)

Comments

- (FS) – (b) (5)

- (NRCS) – (b) (5)

- (OGC) – (b) (5)
- 

Workplan Template for Reorganization/Realignment (handout) – Chris Nelson

Provided an overview and sample template of proposed action for reorganization/realignment (DR 1010-001 process). The intent is that the summary using the template would be done up front to provide notice and awareness. The template (currently being reviewed and tested by NRCS) would also facilitate in standardizing the process. Additional suggestions/comments are welcome.

StrikeForce Framework – Natasha Brown

Secretary has tasked the StrikeForce Initiative Team (SIT) to develop a framework to institutionalize StrikeForce. The framework has been collaboratively developed and the team is actively working towards meeting the Secretary's request before the end of the FY. Proposing a name change so it will be more independent and more of a "standalone Initiative/program". Will be presenting recommendations to NRCS, FSA, and RD leadership before presenting final recommendations to NFAC.

Meeting Adjourned