

USDA Rural Development: Helping to Put Americans to Work

Last week, Secretary Vilsack [highlighted Rural Development's 2011 investments](#) in job-creating businesses, infrastructure, and housing for Americans living in rural communities across the nation, investments that helped to create or save an estimated 440,000 jobs last year. His announcement accompanied the release of RD's [2011 Progress Report](#), a report we deliver to Congress each year to inform Members about how taxpayer funds are spent.

In 2011, Rural Development allocated almost \$29 billion nationwide to upgrade community facilities, boost the reliability of the electric grid, fund renewable energy projects, provide affordable, reliable Internet service, and create housing opportunities for over 143,000 families. These investments not only generate much-needed jobs; they also create ongoing economic opportunities in rural America that will pay benefits for years to come, all while maximizing private investment in rural infrastructure.

Sixty-three percent of 2011 funding supported loan guarantees that enabled private lenders to safely increase the pool of capital available in rural areas for credit-worthy businesses, communities, and homebuyers, without direct cost to the Government. About 34 percent of our investments were secure, affordable direct loans that will be paid back with interest. Grants were a small fraction of our funding last year but nevertheless helped us to move good projects forward and to stimu-

late local investment. Ever a good steward of taxpayer dollars, RD's cost of doing business in 2011 was less than two cents for every dollar invested.

From budgetary restrictions to the workload, there's no question that this is a difficult time to be in Federal public service. What I think our 2011 Progress Report shows most is that, even in these challenging times, you possessed an enormous capacity to dig deep and find innovative ways to bring our programs and quality service to our customers. I encourage you to share the results outlined in the 2011 report with your contacts where appropriate. Increased public awareness of the impact of our programs will only strengthen support for the RD mission, and this will help us to better serve our customers in the future.

Again, you should be extremely proud of all that you accomplished in 2011. I thank you, and I am deeply grateful for all the efforts you made last year on behalf of rural America, and for all the ways that you continue to support the mission of USDA Rural Development.

Idea Farm update: From my experience, great organizations are those that recognize achievement even as they investigate ways to do better. To build on our successes from last year, we need everyone's ideas about how we can improve our organization's culture and its processes. [Idea Farm](#) is a place where we can gather those ideas and grow them



Under Secretary Dallas Tonsager

together. Because Rural Development spans the geography of the U.S. and its territories, it is critical to the success of our organization that we develop effective communication channels between employees and leadership and then make continuous improvements. RD currently fosters communication with and among its employees through e-mails, letters, town hall-style meetings, agency and program area newsletters, as well as on our new online platform, Idea Farm. We need input on how we as an organization can improve our communications channels, and we'd like you to start a conversation about communications that will be available on Idea Farm until March 1. Please take this opportunity and go to Idea Farm (<http://collaboration.usda.gov/ideafarm>) as soon and as often as you can.

Thank you again for all your hard work and dedication on behalf of USDA Rural Development.

Upcoming Events

Feb. 23-24, 2012:
[Agricultural Outlook Forum](#)

Jan. 1-Dec. 31, 2012:
[International Year of Cooperatives](#)

Blueprint for Stronger Service

Please see page 2 for important information about a proposal to streamline operations and cut costs at USDA. This plan will impact Rural Development and other USDA agencies.

[Go to page 2](#)



Committed to the future of rural communities.

Secretary Vilsack Announces Blueprint for Stronger Service to Increase Efficiency in USDA Operations

USDA must meet the evolving needs of a 21st century agricultural economy, Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack recently said as he presented USDA's [Blueprint for Stronger Service](#), a plan that helps producers continue to drive America's economy by streamlining operations and cutting costs.

"USDA, like families and businesses across the country, cannot continue to operate like we did 50 years ago," said Vilsack. "We must innovate, modernize, and be better stewards of the taxpayers' dollars. We must build on the record accomplishments of farm communities in 2011 with a stronger, more effective USDA in 2012 and beyond."

The [Blueprint for Stronger Service](#) is based on a review of operations USDA conducted as part of the Administration's Campaign to Cut Waste, launched by President Obama and Vice President Biden to make government work better and more efficiently for the American people. The agency took a hard look at all USDA operations, from headquarters to field offices. The end result is a plan that will create optimal use of USDA's employees, better results for USDA customers, and greater efficiencies for American taxpayers.

USDA will close 259 domestic offices, facilities, and labs across the country, as well as seven foreign offices. In some cases, offices are no longer staffed or have a very small staff; many are within 20 miles of other USDA offices. In other cases, technology improvements, advanced service centers, and broadband service have reduced some need for brick and mortar facilities.

When fully implemented, the plan will provide efficiencies valued at about \$150 million annually and eventually more based on future workforce realignment, and will ensure that USDA continues to provide optimal service to the American people with available funds. The plans to close or consolidate facility, office, and lab operations will impact USDA headquarters in Washington, 46 States, and 1 U.S. territory.

- Farm Service Agency (FSA): Consolidate 131 county offices in 32 States; more than 2,100 FSA offices remain throughout the U.S.
- Foreign Agricultural Service (FAS): Close 2 country offices; more than 95 FAS offices remain throughout the world
- Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS): Close 15 APHIS offices in 11 States and 5 APHIS offices in 5 foreign countries; more than 560 APHIS offices remain throughout the U.S. and 55 remain throughout the world
- **Rural Development (RD): Close 43 area and sub-offices in 17 States and U.S. territories; approximately 450 RD offices remain throughout the U.S. [See box at right]**
- Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS): Close 24 soil survey offices in 21 States; more than 2,800 NRCS offices remain throughout the U.S.
- Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS): Close 5 district offices in 5 States; 10 district offices remain throughout the U.S.
- Agricultural Research Service (ARS): Close 12 programs at 10 locations; more than 240 programs remain throughout the U.S.
- Food, Nutrition and Consumer Services (FNCS): Close 31 field offices in 28 States; 32 FNCS offices will remain throughout the U.S.

In addition, USDA is implementing a series of other changes that will save taxpayers' money while eliminating redundancies and inefficiencies. The Blueprint for Stronger Service details 133 recommendations that affirm processes already in place, as well as 27 initial improvements, and other, longer-term improvements. The initial improvements include the following:

- Consolidate more than 700 cell phone plans into about 10
- Standardize civil rights training and purchases of cyber security products, and
- Ensure more efficient and effective service to our employees by moving toward more centralized civil rights, human resource, procurement, and property management functions, creating millions of dollars in efficiencies without sacrificing the quality of our work

The Secretary detailed the changes in a speech at the American Farm Bureau Federation's 93rd Annual Meeting, where he also highlighted the impressive achievements of American agriculture over the past three years. Currently, U.S. agriculture is experiencing its most productive period in history thanks to the resiliency, resourcefulness, and efficiency of American producers. The Blueprint for Stronger Service will allow USDA to continue the investments that help to make this possible.

Detailed factsheets on the Blueprint for Stronger Service can be found here by Mission Area: [Farm and Foreign Agricultural Services \(FFAS\)](#); [Food, Nutrition, and Consumer Services \(FNCS\)](#); [Food Safety](#); [Marketing and Regulatory Programs \(MRP\)](#); [Natural Resources and the Environment \(NRE\)](#); [Research, Education and Economics \(REE\)](#); and [Rural Development](#).

As part of the Blueprint for Stronger Service, RD plans to close 43 offices in the following locations:

- **Alabama:** Houston County
- **Arizona:** Mohave County
- **Arkansas:** Izard, Faulkner, Hot Spring, White, and Lawrence Counties
- **Delaware:** Kent and Sussex Counties
- **Hawaii:** 1) Kosrae, Chuuk, and Yap and 2) Hawaii County
- **Indiana:** Monroe, Tippecanoe, LaPorte, and Marshall Counties
- **Louisiana:** Livingston County
- **Maryland:** Calvert, Garrett, and Worcester Counties
- **Mississippi:** DeSoto County
- **Missouri:** Jasper, Jefferson, Cape Girardeau, and Cole Counties
- **North Carolina:** Burke, Chowan, and Caswell Counties
- **Oklahoma:** Pushmataha and Pittsburg Counties
- **Pennsylvania:** Juniata County
- **South Carolina:** Richland and Sumter Counties
- **Tennessee:** Anderson, Bedford, Bledsoe, Cannon, Carter, Cocke, Humphreys, Sevier, and Trousdale Counties
- **Virginia:** Essex County
- **Wyoming:** Park County

USDA and RD Help Student Trainee Launch His Career

by Edgar Ortega, Loan Specialist, El Centro, California Service Center

When I was a little boy, I watched my dad get up at six in the morning and get ready to go to work. One day he said he was going to take me to work and show me what he did for a living. I was excited. That day, he took me to this immense green field in the country and said, "This is where I work." My dad showed me the importance of agriculture in the Imperial Valley and told me that this could be my job, and that I could make a career out of it. Furthermore, I could make sure that the Imperial Valley would stay as the leading farming place in America.

My story starts when I was selected to participate in USDA's Student Ambassador Program, which gave me the opportunity to attend the 2009 [Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities](#)' (HACU) Annual Conference in Orlando, Fla., where I developed leadership skills, networked, and interacted with professionals who are making a difference through public service.

The HACU conference opened a lot of doors. I met professional people who were willing to help me on my career path towards a position in the Federal government. Afterwards, I contacted my local [USDA Hispanic Serving Institute](#) representative, Roberto Gonzales, Jr., who told me about an Area Assistant position in the Indio, Calif., Area Office, funded through the Recovery Act. I immediately applied and got the position. Although the Recovery Act funding was ending, John Jebian,

my Area Director, was happy with my work and recommended me for the [Student Career Experience Program](#). Later, when I graduated with a B.S. in International Business from San Diego State University, Glenda Humiston, my State Director, offered me a full-time position. Can you imagine having all of this happen in one year? I am still in shock.

The full-time position was located in El Centro. Luckily for me, Imperial County is surrounded by agriculture. It provides 90 percent of the crops for the U.S. in the winter. It also has Mexicali, B.C., as its neighbor and thus there is a great cultural mix from both borders. This cultural mix is one of my main focuses within the agency. Being part of the Cultural Transformation Team in California, I feel I have the responsibility, with my bilingual skills, to conduct outreach to people who have language barriers in our community. As Area Assistant, I coordinated many outreach initiatives under the [502 direct housing program](#). This program opened my eyes about the great need for a bilingual specialist in the area.

Currently, I work as an Assistant Energy Coordinator for the [REAP program](#). This program focuses on renewable energy possibilities within the U.S. This position will enable me to interact with leading industry developers on renewable energy and current engineers in the field; with the resources from Rural Development, I will be able to offer our programs to farm-



Edgar Ortega assists a customer at the El Centro office

ers and small businesses to reduce our fossil fuel dependency in America.

The USDA needs college graduates that are natives of their agricultural sectors. I will provide professional help to my fellow farmers and ranchers in the Imperial Valley, providing a cultural outlook on our Hispanic population. The cultural transformation within RD will help Hispanics and other races thrive with the help of our programs and services.

As a leader in the USDA, I will provide honesty, integrity, and character to my fellow workers. I will commit to a challenging and productive work environment where I can continuously improve my skills and knowledge and contribute to the health and prosperity of this great nation.



Disability.gov, a Resource for Assistive and Accessible Technology, Programs, and Services

Disability.gov — at www.disability.gov — is the Federal government website for comprehensive information on disability programs and services in communities nationwide. The site links to more than 14,000 resources from Federal, State, and local government agencies; academic institutions; and nonprofit organizations.

Disability.gov is managed by the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy in collaboration with 21 Federal agency partners, including the Federal Communications Commission.

The site is organized into 10 main subject areas: Benefits, Civil Rights, Community Life, Education, Emergency Preparedness, Employment, Health, Housing, Technology, and Transportation.

In the Technology section, visitors can find information on assistive and accessible technologies (such as communication devices, screen readers, and equipment to improve mobility); emergency communications systems; the accessibility features of new technologies like digital books and smart phones; and guidelines and standards related to technology accessibility for people with disabilities. Visitors may use the Information by State drop-down menu, located on the left side of any page on Disability.gov, to find local resources that can help pay for assistive technology needs.

We encourage you to tell your friends and colleagues about Disability.gov to receive the latest updates, events, and information regarding innovative accessible technologies.

Contributed by Gary Bojes of Rural Utilities

Blog of the Month: Supporting Those Who Go Green With a New Energy Efficiency Initiative

Reducing rental housing operating expenses, preserving the environment and promoting local energy sources is a priority for USDA Rural Development, demonstrated by green-energy initiatives like the [Rural Energy for America Program \(REAP\)](#) and the [Business and Industry Guaranteed Loan Program](#). Rural Development is now offering the Multi-Family Housing Energy Efficiency Initiative as part of the existing application process for the Section 515 Rural Rental Housing Program for New Construction, the Section 514 Farm Labor Housing Loans and Section 516 Farm Labor Housing Grants for Off-Farm Housing, the Section 522 Housing Preservation Grants, and Sections 514, 515 and 516 Multi-Family Housing Revitalization Demonstration Programs. This new initiative aims to promote development projects that make an effort to reduce energy use, reduce energy required from the energy grid supply, have little or no net emission of greenhouse gasses, and are economically viable.

The [Energy Efficiency Initiative](#) focuses on three areas: energy conservation, energy generation, and green property management. Points are given to applicants for energy efficiency certifications, use of energy efficient building materials and design strategies, generation of energy on-site, and commitments to energy efficient post-construction operation and maintenance. Through administration of this initiative combined with existing Rural Development programs, USDA hopes to reduce the need for outside energy sources, reduce energy costs, promote the economy, and ultimately secure a better environment for future generations.

Several Rural Development-funded green energy projects are already experiencing the many benefits of conserving energy.



Montgomery Crossing, a green housing complex in Kings County, Calif., financed by Rural Development

[Read More >>](#)

Managers' Responsibilities

To review online documents that outline actions that managers must take to implement CT initiatives, visit:

RD users, except in the Whitten Building: <https://rd.sc.egov.usda.gov/teamrd/culturaltrans/default.aspx>

RD users in the Whitten Building: <https://rd-extra.sc.egov.usda.gov/teamrd/culturaltrans/default.aspx> (Access is through eAuth. First-time users will see a pop-up window to request site access. Once access is granted, use your eAuth ID for future log-ons.)

Rural Development Cultural Transformation National Team

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