



United States Department of Agriculture

# 2018 Plain Writing Compliance Report

July 1, 2019



TO: Employees

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) takes great strides to ensure our programs and services are delivered efficiently, effectively, and with the highest quality of customer service. To achieve those results, we're dedicated to communicating simply and clearly to our audiences. This year, I want to again emphasize the need to use plain language in all our correspondence, public-facing documents, internal communication, and content featured on digital media. The American public deserves nothing less.

Plain and concise language, along with timely responses, are at the very heart of good customer service. At USDA, we strive to inform the public of all the services and programs we provide to individuals and their families. By presenting understandable and easy to access information, we can be assured of meeting that important promise.

Fulfilling that outcome, however, doesn't come without challenges. Like all Federal departments, we're tasked to 1) enhance customer experiences through modern information technology, facilities, and support services; 2) maintain a strong workforce through engagement and empowerment; 3) overcome obstacles by reducing regulatory burdens and streamlining processes; and 4) improve the stewardship of resources and leverage data-driven analysis to maximize the return on investment.

To meet those challenges, we must focus on clarity through any path we connect with the public. Distilling complex, highly-technical language doesn't always come easy, but it's what we must do day in and day out for our Nation's citizens.

Two main criteria are central to Federal departments making the grade: compliance and consistency. In other words, does agency content adhere to the Plain Writing Act of 2010? And do the products we produce consistently make it easier to read, understand, and use?

Here at the "People's Department," I think I know the answer. Thanks to the tireless efforts of our agencies, USDA's 2017 Plain Writing Compliance Report followed up its 2016 success with one of the highest ratings in the Federal Government. In fact, USDA was just one of three Federal agencies that tallied "A" grades in both the Organizational Compliance and Writing Quality categories in 2017.

Together, with OneUSDA as our guiding value, I'm confident we can build on that success.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Sonny Perdue". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Sonny Perdue

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# Introduction

## Our Pledge

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) is committed to improving its service to our internal and external customers by writing in plain language. We use plain language in any new or substantially revised document that:

- Provides information about any of our services and benefits
- Is necessary to obtain any of our benefits or services
- Explains how to comply with a requirement that we administer or enforce.

USDA pledges to provide our customers with information that is clear, understandable, and useful in every paper or electronic letter, publication, form, notice, or instruction produced by the Department. USDA's commitments and plain language resources can be found on USDA's Plain Writing Web site.

## The Report

This report focuses on the period between January 1, 2018, and December 31, 2018. The Plain Writing Act of 2010 requires that USDA write all new publications, forms, and publicly distributed documents in a manner that is "clear, concise, well-organized, and follows other best practices appropriate to the subject or field and intended audience." On July 13, 2011, USDA published its first report, an implementing plan that detailed our goals for plain writing. We published our first compliance report in 2012 and every year thereafter. This year, we report on how we have built on our prior efforts toward meeting the goals in the Plain Writing Act.

Read more on USDA Plain Writing Act implementing report:

USDA's Plain Writing Act

<http://www.usda.gov/documents/PL-Report-final.pdf>

# Agency Accomplishments

USDA strives to convey information to the public, using plain writing principles in a variety of print and electronic media. USDA's commitment to plain writing principles in its agency communications has resulted in improved performance.

The following pages highlight a sampling of agencies' print and electronic communications. These documents have been produced in a format consistent with plain writing principles and reflect the many ways the use of plain language assists in effectively conveying information to the public.

## Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights

### Inform agency staff of Plain Language requirements

Information is disseminated in staff meetings and a link to Plain Writing is available at <https://www.ascr.usda.gov>

## Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) Requests

The Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights (OASCR) issues correspondence responding to internal and external customer requests or filed complaints. OASCR staff is expected to write in a way that ensures their audience clearly understands what is communicated. Two days of plain language training were conducted by a University of Texas Law School professor. One course dealt with simple business correspondence, while the other covered drafting final agency decisions using plain non-legal terms. The sample FOIA letter provides instructions to customers seeking information from OASCR under the Freedom of Information Act.

## Sample Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) Request Letter

[Date]

[Return Address]

Director  
Center for Civil Rights Enforcement  
1400 Independence Avenue, SW.  
Washington, D.C. 20250

Dear \_\_\_\_\_ :

Under the Freedom of Information Act, I am requesting access to [identify the records as clearly and specifically as possible. Include the time period applicable to the records you seek, i.e., 1 month, 2 years, etc.].

[Specify if you are a commercial requester, are representing an educational institution or a noncommercial scientific institution, are a member of the news media or a public interest group, or other.] Please supply the records without informing me of the cost if the fees do not exceed [\$\_\_\_\_\_], which I agree to pay. [OR, if there are any fees charged for searching for or duplication of records, please let me know before you fill my request.

NOTE: This option may delay the processing of your request if the cost exceeds \$25. We must receive in writing your willingness to pay fees before we begin processing your request.]

If you deny any part of this request, please cite each specific exemption that you rely on to justify your refusal to release the information and notify me of appeal procedures available under the law.

If you have any questions concerning this request, you may contact me at the following telephone number [number].

Sincerely,

[your signature]

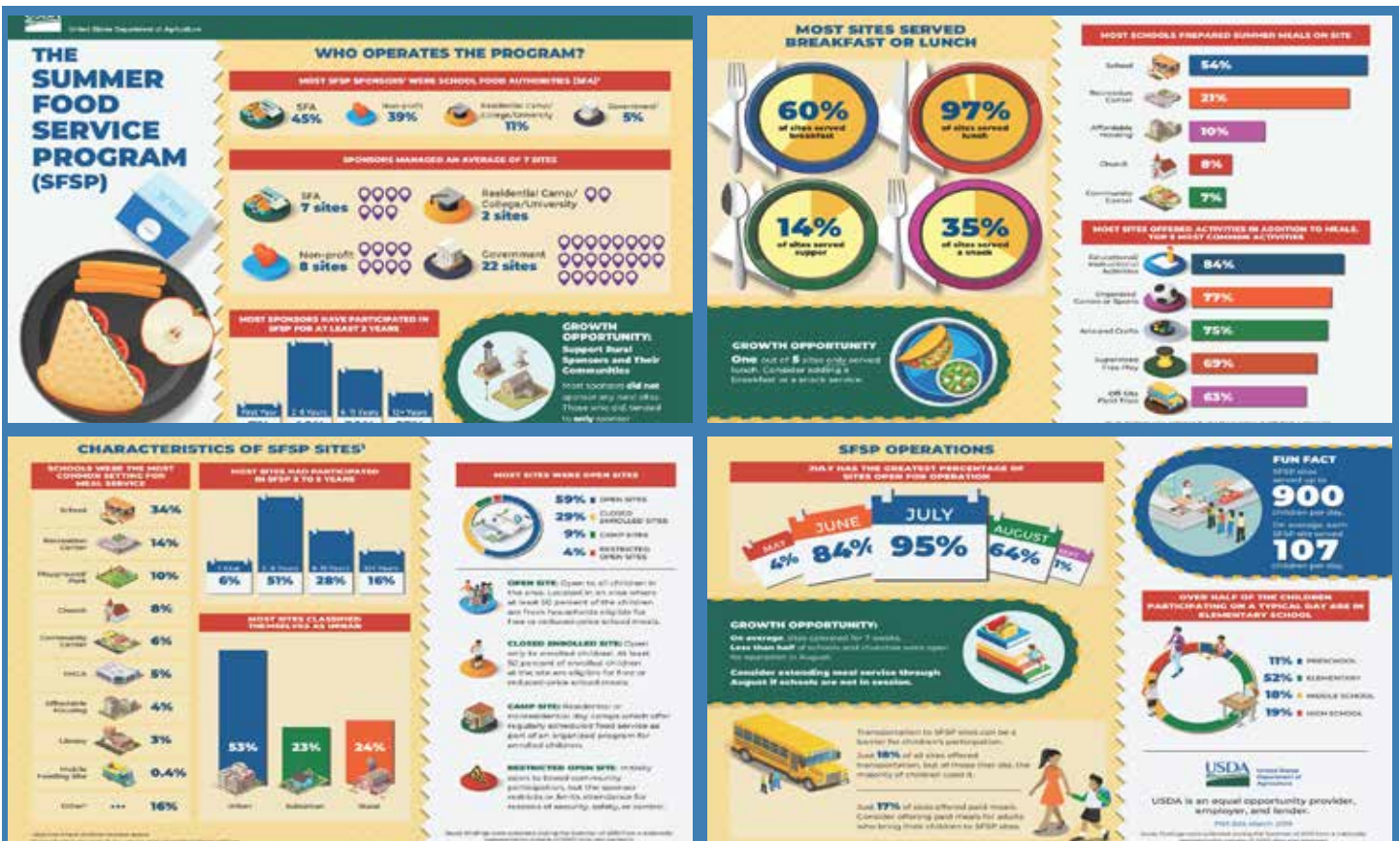
### Training provided by OASCR:

Type of Training	Number of employees trained	Date
Effective Business Writing	17	1st quarter FY 2019
Effective Legal Writing Seminar – Writing Plainly – How to Do It	66	1st quarter FY 2019

# Food, Nutrition, and Consumer Services

The Food, Nutrition, and Consumer Service’s (FNCS) 15 nutrition assistance programs touch the lives of one in four Americans each year, from infants to the elderly. Taken together, these programs comprise America’s nutrition safety net.

The Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) provides kids and teens in low-income areas free nutritious meals and snacks during the summer when school is not in session. To highlight a study detailing SFSP operations and characteristics at the State, sponsor, and site levels, the agency created an infographic to inform its many stakeholders.



The Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) Characteristics Study was the first comprehensive evaluation of the program since 2003. The study was designed to describe SFSP operations and characteristics at the State, sponsor, and site levels. Survey data was collected in the summer of 2015 from a census of all 50 States, the District of Columbia, the Virgin Islands, and Puerto Rico; a nationally representative sample of 307 SFSP sponsors; and a nationally representative sample of 320 SFSP sites.

This infographic conveys the results of the study in a way that is quickly consumed and easily understood, and in lieu of publication of a technical research report.

# Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children

WIC, or officially the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children, serves low-income pregnant, postpartum, and breastfeeding women, infants, and children up to age 5 who are at nutritional risk. To provide a “101” for all those immersed and interested in the program, the agency developed one-pagers not just for WIC, but for all its programs that enable USDA and FNCS to “do right and feed everyone.”



United States Department of Agriculture

FOOD AND NUTRITION SERVICE

## Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children

### What Is the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children?

The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) serves low-income pregnant, postpartum, and breastfeeding women, infants, and children up to age 5 who are at nutritional risk. WIC provides participants with nutritious foods to supplement participant diets, nutrition education, and referrals to health and other social services.

### Who Administers WIC?

The U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) administers WIC at the Federal level.

At the State level, WIC is administered by 90 State agencies, including all 50 States, 34 Indian Tribal Organizations, American Samoa, the District of Columbia, Guam, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands. Services are provided at a variety of local clinic locations including, but not limited to, county health departments, hospitals, schools, and Indian Health Service facilities.

### How Does WIC Work?

WIC participants receive benefits to purchase items from a food package tailored to their specific nutritional needs. They also receive nutrition education, including breastfeeding support, and referrals to other health care services as needed through their local WIC clinic.

In some WIC State agencies, participants receive benefits via paper checks or vouchers. Other State agencies issue benefits via a debit-type card known as electronic benefit transfer (EBT). However, all WIC State agencies have been mandated to implement WIC EBT statewide by October 1, 2020.

WIC benefits are generally utilized at retailers such as authorized grocery stores or WIC-only stores. However, in some rural or remote locations, such as Alaska, food may be delivered to a participant’s home.

### How Can People Participate in WIC?

Pregnant, postpartum, and breastfeeding women, infants, and children up to age 5 who meet certain requirements are eligible. These requirements include income eligibility and State residency. Additionally, the applicant must be individually determined to be at “nutritional risk” by a health professional or a trained health official.

### Where Can I Go To Learn More About WIC?

To learn more, visit: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/wic/about-wic-wic-glance>. To find the WIC offices serving your area, go to: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/wic/contacts>.

### Whom at FNS Can I Contact To Discuss WIC?

Please call FNS Division of External and Governmental Affairs at 703-305-2281.

### Key Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children Data

	FY 2013	FY 2014	FY 2015	FY 2016	FY 2017 (estimate)
<b>Participation (in thousands)</b>	8,663	8,258	8,024	7,696	7,286
<b>Total cost (in millions)*</b>	\$6,501.7	\$6,354.2	\$6,222.7	\$5,979.0	\$5,639.4

\* Includes food costs, administrative funding, and funds for program evaluation, Farmers’ Market Nutrition Program, special projects, and infrastructure.  
FY=Fiscal Year

# Food Safety

## Food Safety Inspection Service

The Food Safety Inspection Service (FSIS) works to protect the public's health by ensuring the safety of meat, poultry, and processed egg products. To meet that critical responsibility, it's imperative that their messages are delivered clearly, concisely, and in a timely manner.

In 2018, the agency launched a comprehensive campaign to notify consumers and consumer educators of FSIS' first annual observational study on food safety conducted in a test kitchen. This included emphasizing handwashing and many other safety behaviors. To share these healthy practices, agency communicators used press releases, blogs, graphics, social media, and presentations, all developed with accessible, reader-friendly content.

Infographics and posters are key tools to reach FSIS audiences through both traditional and social media platforms. Examples included food safety tips for Thanksgiving, pregnancy, and weddings, as well as for specific foods like chicken livers.

In addition to the infographic, FSIS communicators designed a poster on chicken liver-associated outbreaks and contamination.

**CHEFS, COOKS, AND CATERERS: COOK CHICKEN LIVER LIKE IT'S CHICKEN (IT IS)**  
Cook Chicken Liver to 165°F

**ALWAYS COOK CHICKEN LIVER ALL THE WAY THROUGH**

- Use a **food thermometer** (you can't tell by looking)
- Cook the inside of the liver to **165°F**, just like you would for other chicken parts

**BACTERIA INSIDE + PARTIAL COOKING = RECIPE FOR ILLNESS**

You might be used to leaving the middle **rare** when cooking chicken liver for **pâté** and similar dishes.

But **Campylobacter** is a type of bacteria that can live **inside** chicken liver. If the middle isn't cooked to **165°F**, bacteria can survive and cause illness.

**most often**  
cramps, diarrhea (sometimes bloody), fever

**less often**  
life-threatening illness, or even death

**At higher risk**

**PROPER COOKING CAN PREVENT ILLNESSES**

- U.S. outbreaks from eating undercooked chicken liver are on the rise. Most are associated with restaurants.
- In one outbreak, the restaurant went out of business after customers ate undercooked chicken liver and got sick.
- Chefs, cooks, and caterers are key to helping prevent these outbreaks.

**Centers for Disease Control and Prevention National Center for Environmental Health**

**USDA**

**PROTECT YOUR CUSTOMERS AND YOUR RESTAURANT BY COOKING CHICKEN LIVER TO 165°F**

CS206272A

**USDA** United States Department of Agriculture

**Chicken Liver-Associated Outbreaks and Contamination, United States, 2000-2017—Opportunities for Outreach and Education**

William A. Laisee<sup>1,2</sup>, Daniel Verter,<sup>1</sup> Daniel Osway-Mattis<sup>3</sup>

1. US Public Health Service; 2. US Department of Agriculture, Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS); 3. US Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

**Introduction**

- Campylobacter and Salmonella most common causes of bacterial foodborne illness in the US
- Chicken liver-associated outbreaks reported in the US and other countries
- US data limited on frequency and characteristics of such outbreaks
- Little known about pathogen contamination in US commercial chicken liver
- Recipes calling for partially cooked chicken liver readily available (e.g. "half-rare pork tenderloin")
- Strong evidence of Campylobacter inside chicken livers from Hazardus (33-40%)

**Methods**

**Outbreak Review, 2000-2016**

- Identified US chicken liver-associated confirmed outbreaks of foodborne infection
- Data sources:
  - FFIS outbreak data
  - CDC Foodborne Outbreak Surveillance System<sup>1</sup>
  - Published outbreak reports
- Identified various outbreak features (e.g. demographics, pathogen, vehicle, food preparation setting, contributing factors)
- Wilson Rapid Sure Test used to assess changes in outbreak size

**Chicken Liver Sampling, Nov 2016-Nov 2017**

- Collected from 153 establishments
- Provide samples (50 ml, sterile bottle)
- Analyzed for Campylobacter (direct plating)<sup>2</sup> & Salmonella (culture/enrich)

**Results**

**Outbreak Review, Nov 2010-Nov 2017**

- 28 outbreaks reported
- 18 (64%) occurred during 2014-2016
- 363 illnesses, 88 hospitalizations
- 177 (15%) of 843 case-patients were female among those with available information
- Campylobacter (63/100% of outbreaks)
- Median number of illnesses per outbreak: 8.2 (range 1-18 during 2000-2016)
- Median number of illnesses per outbreak increased during study period (p=0.002)
- 1-3 during 2000-2014
- 4-5.3 during 2014-2016
- Common contributing factors:
  - Under or under-blended (24 in 24 (100%))
  - Undercooked cooking in 35 (33%)
  - Prepared in foodservice setting in 75 (30%)

**Chicken Liver Sampling, Nov 2016-Nov 2017**

**Discussion**

**Reference**

- Increasing reported outbreaks and high contamination percentages highlight chicken liver as important food safety challenge

**Recommendations**

- Caution poultry products, including chicken liver, to an internal temperature of 165°F as measured by a food thermometer
- Advise foodservice professionals about illness and the importance of adequate cooking
- Consumer education:
  - Food safety tip sheet and social fact sheet
  - Conduct focus groups to inform consumer outreach
  - Provide industry education of key messages
- Sampling:
  - Continue to monitor sampling data to understand contamination
  - Determine pathogen prevalence at FSO establishments
- Prioritize research focused on:
  - Virulence/tolerance of outbreak strains
  - Pathogen prevalence at retail
  - Safely accepted cold preparation methods
  - Additional interventions (e.g. high pressure processing)

**Footnotes:**

1. CDC, 2016. <https://www.cdc.gov/od/oc/ohrt/>
2. FSIS, 2016. <https://www.fsis.usda.gov/food-safety-and-inspection-service>

**Acknowledgments:**

- 1. USDA, 2016. <https://www.usda.gov/>
- 2. FSIS, 2016. <https://www.fsis.usda.gov/>
- 3. CDC, 2016. <https://www.cdc.gov/>

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USDA | FSIS | CDC



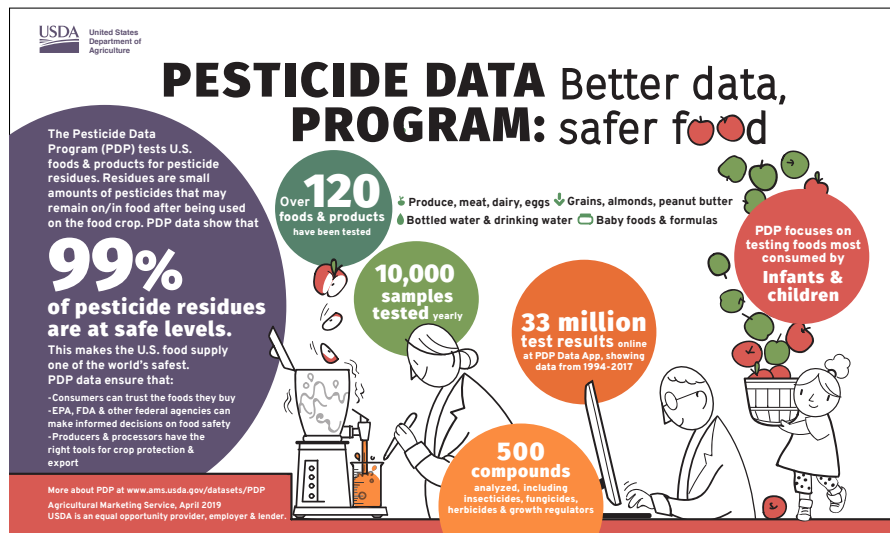
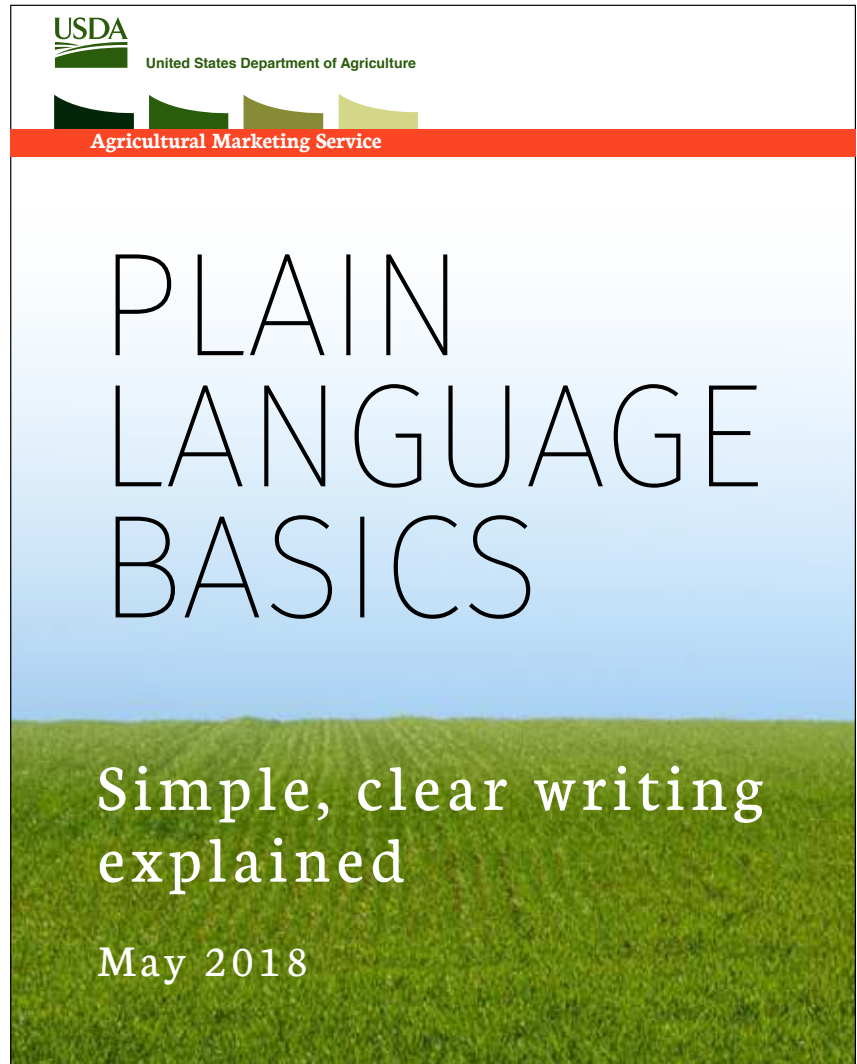
# Marketing and Regulatory Programs

## Agricultural Marketing Service

The Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) administers programs that create domestic and international marketing opportunities for U.S. producers of food, fiber, and specialty crops. To best reach their targeted contacts, AMS provides employees and leadership with an accessible guide on developing content with plain language. The Plain Language Playbook is a useful ‘takeaway’ that follows formal plain language training, and is used as a vital reference for every member of the agency.

To benefit its customers, The Playbook advises agency employees on how to write their products with the highest level of clarity. The resource also reminds them to write for their audience and provide the information their customers need; use headings and subheadings to help guide the reader; avoid jargon and acronyms; and use the simplest and fewest possible words.

The U.S. food supply is one of the safest in the world, and AMS takes great pride in its role to ensure consumers can trust the foods they buy. Thanks to products like the Pesticide Data Program infographic, millions of Americans are better informed about safety levels for the foods they consume.



# Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service

The Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service is a multi-faceted agency with a broad mission area that includes protecting and promoting U.S. agricultural health, regulating genetically engineered organisms, administering the Animal Welfare Act, and carrying out wildlife damage management activities. These efforts support the overall mission of USDA, which is to protect and promote food, agriculture, natural resources, and related issues.



To protect agricultural health, APHIS is on the job 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, working to defend America’s animal and plant resources from agricultural pests and diseases. For example, if the Mediterranean fruit fly and Asian Longhorn beetle – two major agricultural pests – were left unchecked, the result would be several billion dollars in production and marketing losses annually.

## African Swine Fever

African swine fever (ASF) is a highly contagious and deadly viral disease affecting both domestic and wild pigs of all ages. It is not a threat to human health and cannot be transmitted from pigs to humans, nor is it a food safety issue. ASF is found around the world, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. More recently, it has spread through China, Mongolia, Vietnam, and within parts of the European Union. It has never been found in the United States – and we want to keep it that way.

The Automated Commercial Environment (ACE) is the system the U.S. Government uses to process imports and exports. Importers can now use ACE to submit APHIS-required import data for Agency-regulated products. If you have questions, please call 1-844-820-2234 or link to us from the information provided at the bottom of both infographics.

**United States Department of Agriculture**  
Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service

### What Is the Automated Commercial Environment (ACE)?

- ACE allows businesses to electronically submit the import data** required by U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) and its partner Government agencies, including USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS).
- ACE automates and streamlines** manual processes, eliminating paper.
- The new system will allow importers to **comply** with U.S. laws and regulations more **easily and efficiently**.

**The Automated Commercial Environment**

**Filers are responsible for developing or acquiring the software** needed to support the functional aspects of ACE, including the preparation, electronic filing, and, as necessary, printing of required forms.

**Government-to-Government certificates** – phytosanitary and veterinary certificates – **must still be presented in their original paper format**.

**ACE IS AVAILABLE FOR USE NOW.**  
ACE is currently optional for those importing APHIS-regulated products. Because ACE will eventually become mandatory, we encourage importers to contact their broker to learn more and start using it as soon as possible.

### Why Should I Use ACE?

**Accuracy**  
ACE allows CBP and APHIS to collect **more complete and accurate data**, providing more control over products entering the United States.

**Speed**  
ACE **speeds up entry processing**, streamlining the process and allowing products to be released quickly.

**Validation**  
If the data does not pass validations or if certain data is missing, filers receive an error response, allowing them to **correct errors before they delay the release of a shipment**.

**Improvement**  
ACE gives importers the chance to **troubleshoot and improve their own processes**.

For more information, email us at [ace.its@aphis.usda.gov](mailto:ace.its@aphis.usda.gov).

**United States Department of Agriculture**  
Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service

### How To Get Started With ACE

The Automated Commercial Environment (ACE) is a **single portal system** designed to electronically collect and distribute import data that the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's Customs and Border Protection (CBP) and its partner Government agencies (PGAs) require.

CBP uses ACE to collect import data traditionally collected on paper, consolidating it and adding data elements into what are known as **message sets**.

**ACE OR PAPER?**

**USE ACE** for import information on **commodities regulated by USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) that require entry documentation**—certain animal and plant products, germplasm, soil, among others.

**USE PAPER** for **Government-to-Government certificates**, such as phytosanitary and veterinary health certificates.

**GETTING STARTED WITH ACE DEPENDS ON WHETHER OR NOT YOU USE A BROKER.**

If you have a **BROKER**

- 1** Contact your broker to determine if they are able to electronically file APHIS import data through ACE. CBP works with 47 PGAs, all with unique needs, so it is important to verify that your broker has the ability to file APHIS-specific import data in message set formats.
- 2** If the broker is not prepared to submit APHIS-required data through the message set, they will need to work with an **ACE-approved software vendor** to obtain the appropriate software.
- 3** For each shipment you will need to **provide your broker with all the required documentation** so they can file the relevant information through ACE.
- 4** If you have questions about APHIS import requirements, go to APHIS' Import/Export web page at [www.aphis.usda.gov/aphis/ourfocus/importexport](http://www.aphis.usda.gov/aphis/ourfocus/importexport) or call the Customer Service Center at 1-844-820-2234.
- 5** If your broker has technical questions about filing APHIS data in ACE, email the APHIS ACE team at [ace.its@aphis.usda.gov](mailto:ace.its@aphis.usda.gov).

If you are a **SELF FILER**

- 1** If you do not wish to use a third-party broker to file import data through ACE on your behalf, you **must obtain the appropriate software to file APHIS data in ACE**.
- 2** If you choose to purchase software, **make sure the software is approved for submitting data to ACE**. You can find a list of ACE-approved software vendors at [www.cbp.gov/document/guidance/ab-software-vendors-list](http://www.cbp.gov/document/guidance/ab-software-vendors-list).
- 3** When contacting a vendor, **you must ensure their software supports APHIS import data requirements**. ACE services 47 PGAs, so it is important that any software you purchase supports APHIS' unique needs.
- 4** When choosing a software vendor, **make sure your purchase includes technical support**. ACE data requirements will change over time, and software vendors will need to provide updates and technical support.
- 5** If you have questions about APHIS import requirements, go to APHIS' Import/Export web page at [www.aphis.usda.gov/aphis/ourfocus/importexport](http://www.aphis.usda.gov/aphis/ourfocus/importexport) or call the Customer Service Center at 1-844-820-2234.
- 6** If you have technical questions about filing APHIS data in ACE, email the APHIS ACE team at [ace.its@aphis.usda.gov](mailto:ace.its@aphis.usda.gov).
- 7** If you choose **not to file ACE data electronically**, you will need to provide all your import information in **paper form**, which may result in extra custom review and increased costs due to longer review time for paper submissions, potential for lost and/or delayed paperwork, and inability to anticipate issues.

For more information, email us at [ace.its@aphis.usda.gov](mailto:ace.its@aphis.usda.gov).

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PHO-18-002

# Natural Resources and Environment

## Forest Service

The Plain Writing Act of 2010 requires all Federal agencies to write “clear government communication that the public can understand and use.” Since its inception, the agency has worked to:

- Raise awareness about plain writing requirements and the need to improve writing at all levels of the agency.
- Emphasize the need for clear, concise writing in all materials whether internal or external, such as briefing papers, publications, web content, story maps, speeches, and correspondence.
- Improve the document clearance process to include evaluation of clarity, which also provides employees a real-time learning experience.
- Encourage employees to take advantage of AgLearn and other outlets for plain language-related courses such as grammar, business writing, editing, and rulemaking.
- Incorporate plain language tenets into digital products, such as social media, video, audio, and web content.

The Forest Service is committed to producing agency documents in compliance with the Plain Language Act. We also are working to ensure every employee understands that clear writing is a requirement and an essential tool to ensure that the work we do is readily understood and better connects the public to our work.

## Rocky Mountain Research Station

### Environmental DNA improves tracking of rare carnivores

An innovative new project has found that animal footprints contain enough DNA to allow for species identification. Scientists have traditionally relied on snow tracks and camera traps to monitor populations of rare carnivores, like Canada lynx, fishers (a small carnivore native to North America), and wolverines. These traditional techniques can tell part of the story; but, validating species’ identification can be difficult.



To remedy this, USDA’s Forest Service led a study that collected snow samples within animal tracks from known locations. DNA was taken from the samples and analyzed with the latest technology to identify each species. The Forest Service detected DNA of each species from the various snow samples. The success of this method could greatly reduce or

**FIRE IN**

**WET FORESTS** VS. **DRY FORESTS**

**• HISTORICALLY •**

Wet forests had few, large fires every <b>80 to 500 YEARS.</b>	Dry forests had many, small fires every <b>5 to 50 YEARS.</b>
With less fire, branches, shrubs, and small trees grew quickly, shading and cooling the ground below.	With more fire, needles, branches, and shrubs were cleared away, keeping fire fuels low and tree canopies open.

**• NOW, RESEARCH SHOWS •**

In wet forests, prescribed fires and fuel treatments aren't as effective at preventing severe fires because plants there grow back too quickly.	In dry forests, prescribed fires and fuel treatments effectively remove needles, branches, and shrubs on the ground.
Management that creates a mosaic of tree species, ages, and open tree canopy makes wet forests fire-resilient.	This eliminates potential fire fuel and reduces the risk of severe, uncontrollable fires.

**FORESTS NEED FIRE MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES THAT REFLECT NATURAL FIRE PATTERNS.**

USDA Pacific Northwest Research Station

eliminate wrong or missed detections.

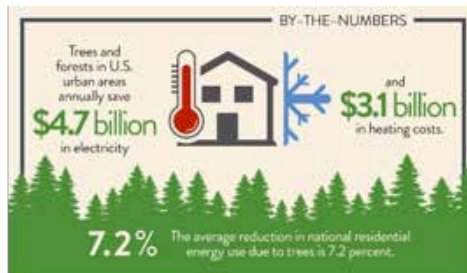
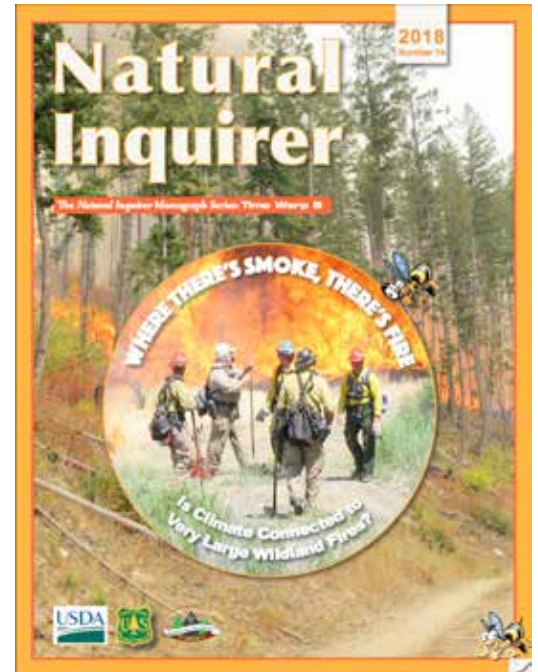
The **Natural Enquirer**, a science magazine, is a collaboration among USDA’s Forest Service, the Cradle of Forestry in America Interpretive Association, and other cooperators and partners. The online publication has a mix of content that reaches pre-kindergarten, elementary, middle, and high school students. Within the Natural Enquirer is a Where There’s Smoke, There’s Fire monograph series based on peer-reviewed journal articles that examine research on large wildland fires and their connection to climate and weather.

## Land and Water Conservation Fund

Created by Congress in 1964, the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) provides money to Federal, State and local governments to purchase land, water, and wetlands for the benefit of all Americans. From majestic forests and snowcapped mountains, to wild rivers and stunning beaches, these acquisitions become part of your national forests.

Water is one of the most important natural resources flowing from forests. The Forest Service manages the largest single source of water in the U.S., with about one-fifth originating from 193 million acres of land.

A network of water and watershed resource specialists support stewardship efforts at all levels of the organization to promote healthy, sustainable watersheds fundamental to ecosystems and people.

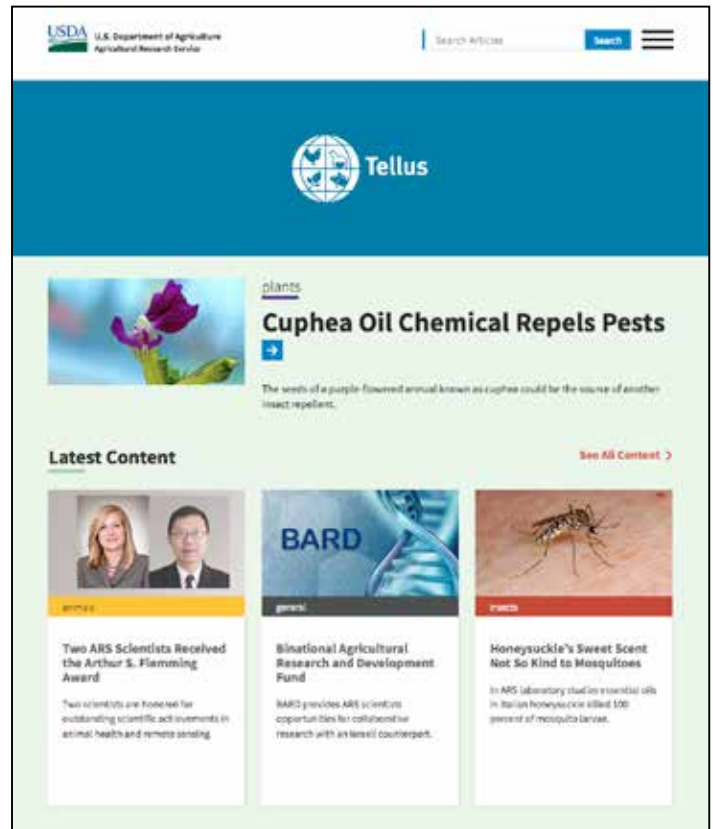


# Research, Education and Economics

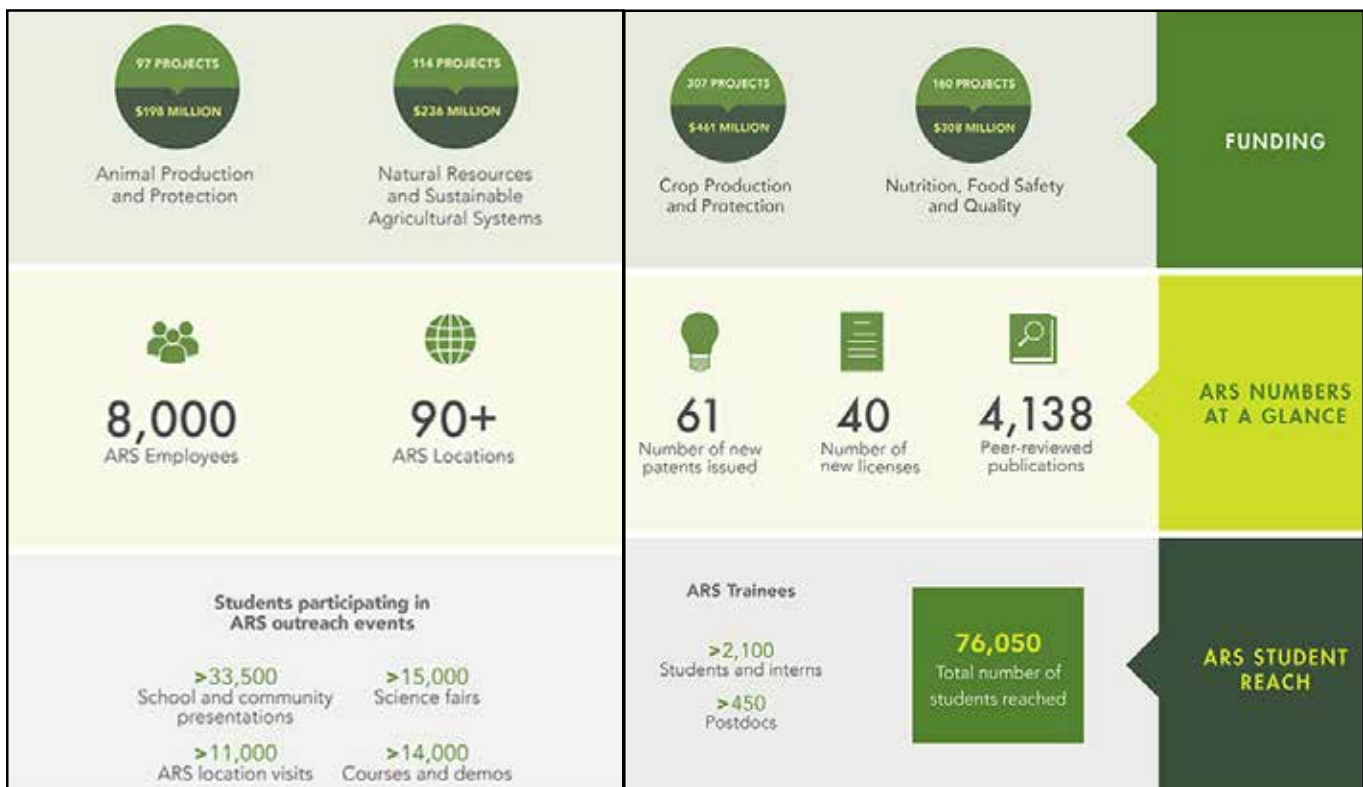
The Research, Education, and Economics (REE) Mission Area is dedicated to the creation of a safe, sustainable, competitive U.S. food and fiber system and building vibrant, healthy communities, families, and youth programs through integrated research, analysis, and education.

## Agricultural Research Service

REE's Agricultural Research Service (ARS) launched "TellUs," a new online communications platform that replaced its legacy AgResearch online magazine. The conversion took months of reimagining and development to bring a fresh source of agricultural information to clients worldwide. In addition to informative stories about ARS research, TellUs includes new products like featured photos, infographics, photo essays, and videos. The site's content covers a variety of topics from field to fork, ranging from human nutrition and food safety, to crop and animal production.



## ARS By the Numbers

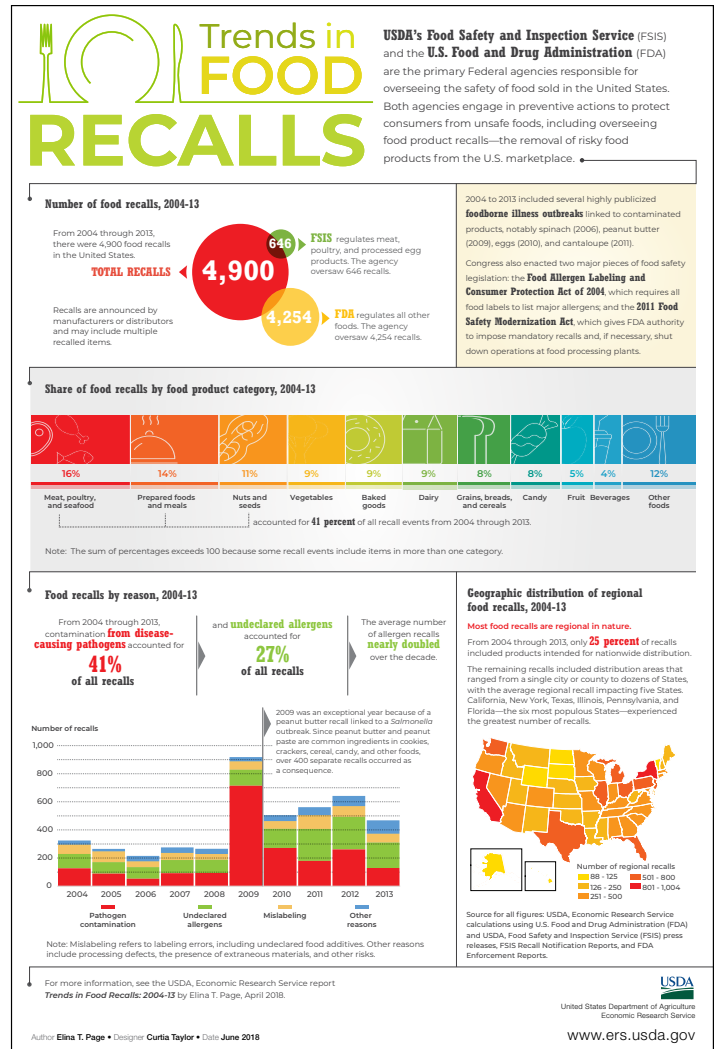


## Economic Research Service

This recent infographic by REE's Economic Research Service (ERS) illustrates trends in food product recalls in the United States over a 10-year period.

Other ERS plain writing efforts to increase comprehension and customer satisfaction include:

- Economic research monographs released via the agency's website, drawing more than 2.4 million unique visitors in 2018. Target Audience: Policymakers, academia, and informed laypeople.
- Market outlook newsletters released monthly via ERS' website. Target Audience: Policymakers and commercial agriculture companies.
- Amber Waves e-zine and infographics released monthly via the agency's website. Target Audience: Policymakers and informed laypeople.
- ERS Publishing Guide and ERS Writing Guide, revised in 2018. Target audience: Agency researchers, editors, and designers.
- Tweets and Charts of Note: To date, ERS posts tweets to more than 30,000 Twitter followers each day, and publishes Charts of Note. See "Charting the Essentials" (lower right) at <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/ag-and-food-statistics-charting-the-essentials/>, an annual compendium of these charts. Target audience: General public, policymakers, academia, and commercial agriculture stakeholders.



## National Agricultural Statistics Service

ERS' National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) continues to speak with data providers and users, the general public, and staff in clear, easy-to-understand, and engaging ways.

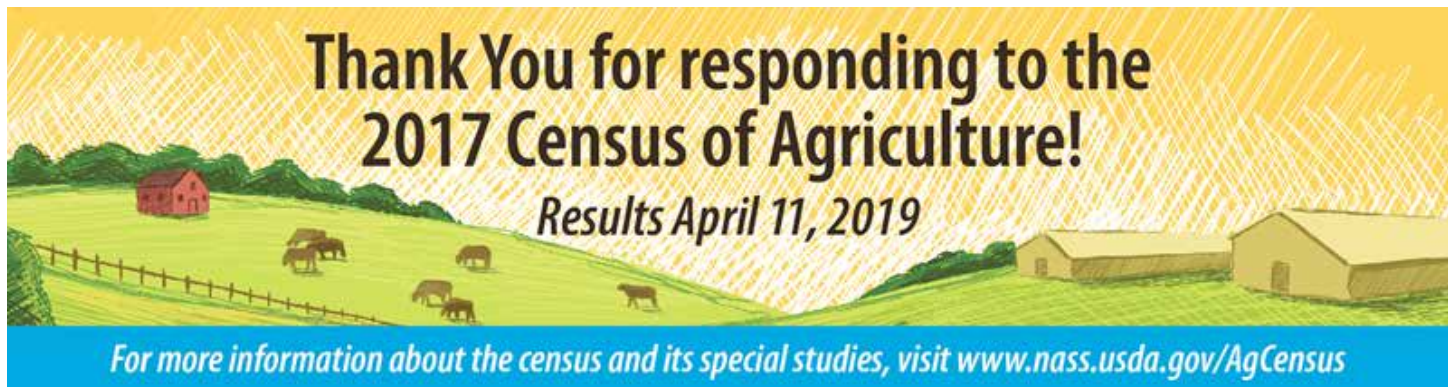
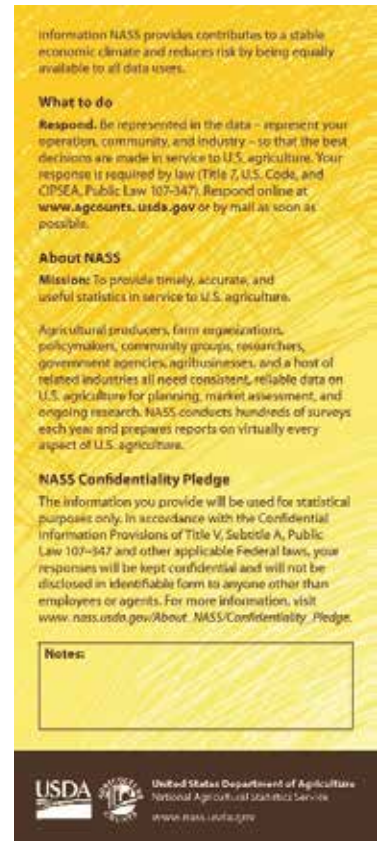
As USDA's statistical agency, NASS' mission is to collect timely, accurate, and useful data about the U.S. agriculture sector from producers and others in agriculture. Communicating clearly with those who provide the data on why their participation matters – to the Nation, the agriculture sector, their communities, and their own operations – is essential.

### Census Products: Simple, Direct Messaging Key to Successful Data Collection

**The Issue.** In addition to its regular survey work, NASS conducted the 2017 Census of Agriculture in 2018, a once-every-five-year effort to reach every producer in the Nation with operations that sell or normally sell at least \$1,000 in agricultural product. This involved an initial mailing to 3 million potential producers, including many with whom NASS does not have regular contact.

**The Tools.** NASS created a suite of tools to encourage participation. The Census of Agriculture rack cards, for instance, provide enumerators with talking points during field visits and serve as reader-friendly, engaging reminder notices for producers.

An email footer keeps the data collection message front and center as NASS conducts census follow-on studies and highlights the release of the data (continued on page 14).



**Results.** The Census of Agriculture had a 72 percent response rate, with nearly one-fourth of producers responding online.

### Improved Online Access

**The Issue.** In terms of data collection and preparing for release of census data, NASS took steps to make the online experience easier, faster, and more engaging.

**Online Response Form.** A new, state-of-the-art NASS online response form was distributed in 2018. The Census of Agriculture questionnaire was sent to approximately 3 million agriculture contacts, requesting detailed information on their farm or ranch operation, output, and 2017 income. The modern form is accessible on any device, calculates automatically, and skips questions that do not apply.

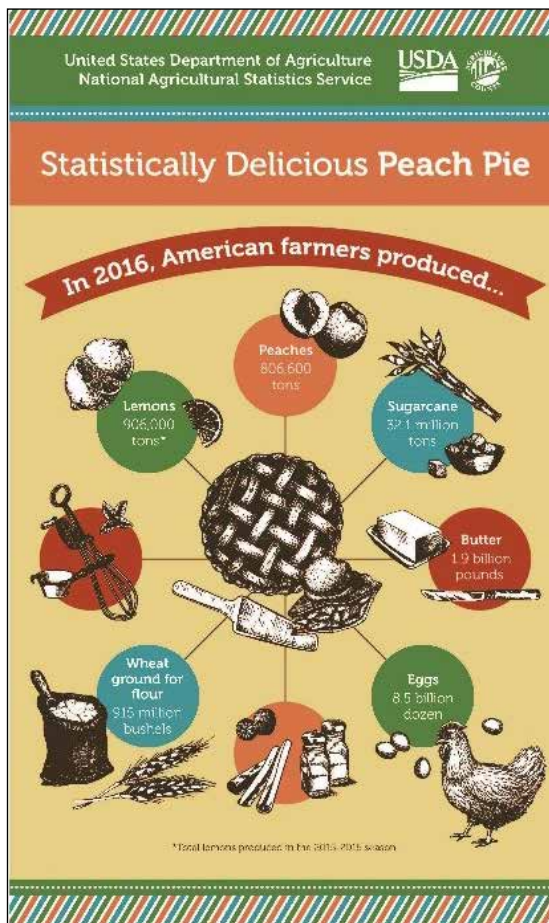
The proportion of those who responded online was more than 10 percent higher in 2017 than in 2012. The form is being expanded for use in all NASS national

surveys and is expected to grow the proportion of producers who respond online.

**Merging the Ag Census and NASS Websites.** In advance of releasing 2017 Census of Agriculture Data (bottom right), NASS fully integrated the Census of Agriculture website <https://www.nass.usda.gov/AgCensus/> into its primary website to provide a consistent look and feel. Merging the websites was a response to feedback from customers, stakeholders, and partners, who prefer to access all NASS data in the same visit, including on mobile devices.

### Making the Data Fun

Most of NASS' work involves producing data critical for a detailed, reliable picture of U.S. agriculture. That data contains the story of what Americans eat, grow, wear, and treasure. Sometimes NASS likes to present the numbers in fun ways that relate directly to Americans' homes and daily choices. This "Statistically Delicious Peach Pie" infographic, for example, shows how much of the dessert's ingredients were produced by American farmers.





## Office of the Chief Scientist

The Office of the Chief Scientist (OCS) provides leadership and coordination to ensure that scientific research supported by USDA and presented to external stakeholders is held to the highest standards of intellectual rigor and scientific integrity.

OCS strives to inform policy and programmatic decisions within the Department by providing the best available scientific advice and input; establish appropriate linkages between USDA and other science-performing organizations in government (U.S. and abroad), academia, and industry; and ensure the dissemination of USDA science to stakeholders across the spectrum of policy making nationally and internationally.

On June 27 and 28, 2018, the U.S. Departments of Agriculture and Energy co-hosted a workshop in Washington, D.C., that engaged stakeholders, experts, and researchers nationwide on the potential for indoor agriculture to address global environmental challenges. Participants collaborated to identify research and development challenges, opportunities, and needs relating to six major areas: Community Services, Plant Breeding, Economics, Pest Management, Ecosystem Services, and Systems Engineering (Click below to read the full report).

**February 2019**

**WORKSHOP REPORT**

**RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT POTENTIALS IN INDOOR AGRICULTURE AND SUSTAINABLE URBAN ECOSYSTEMS**

U.S. Department of Agriculture, Office of the Chief Scientist & U.S. Department of Energy, Bioenergy Technologies Office | Washington D.C.

**USDA Research Progress Towards Global Food Security**

Posted by Genevieve Craft, International Affairs Fellow, Office of the Chief Scientist in [Research and Science](#) on 02/23/2018

USDA research helps the United States remain a leader in global agriculture.

Most of us living in the United States are fortunate enough not to wonder where our next meal will come from. Yet across the globe, at least some time during the year, nearly 800 million people do. Not having access to stable and nutritious food sources – or food insecurity – negatively impacts people's lives. Food security, on the other hand, means access by all people at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life.

USDA research agencies study food security and insecurity so that we recognize the challenges and develop effective and innovative ways to fight against them. Globally, if we can equip people with the knowledge and tools to feed themselves and participate in global markets, we can address the root causes of poverty and hunger, help end reliance on foreign aid, and create opportunities for a new generation of young people – all while building a more stable and interconnected world. We need research to discover and fine-tune solutions.

**Tree Breeding: Creating Tomorrow's Healthy Forests Today**

Posted by Paul Zarkowksi, Senior Advisor for Plant Health and Production and Plant Products, Office of the Chief Scientist and Sarah Federman, AAAS Science & Technology Policy Fellow, Office of the Chief Scientist in [Research and Science](#) on 06/12/2018

Wildfires pose a threat to our nation's forests and the people who depend on them. Photo credit: Richard Stebbins

Incredible and long-lived, trees endure extreme weather, fires, and pests for tens, hundreds, and even thousands of years. In [California's National Forest, USA](#), there is a quaking aspen colony spanning 106 acres that is roughly 80,000 years old. To give you a sense of scale, if the average human lives 75 years, this aspen colony has already lived over a thousand times longer!

Why all this emphasis on tree and longevity? Trees can tell us a lot about the histories of their ecosystems. Knowing these histories can help us develop plans to sustainably manage healthy forests into the future, which is in keeping with USDA's [ecologic goals](#) to "strengthen stewardship of private lands," and to "foster productive and sustainable use of our national forest system(s)." In other words, any plan for a healthy forest today must also account for tomorrow, and the tomorrows after that.

# Rural Development

## Rural Housing Service

Nearly 60 million Americans live in rural areas. The Rural Housing Service (RHS), an element of USDA's Rural Development, offers a variety of programs to build or improve housing and essential community facilities in those areas. The Agency offers loans, grants, and loan guarantees for single- and multi-family housing (MFH), child care centers, fire and police stations, hospitals, libraries, nursing homes, schools, first responder vehicles and equipment, housing for farm laborers, and much more.

RHS provides technical assistance loans and grants in partnership with non-profit organizations, Indian tribes, State and Federal Government agencies, and local communities. (Loan Packaging Express infographic bottom right)

In September 2018, RHS announced funding to address opioid misuse. RHS reserved \$5 million in the Community Facilities Grant Program and gives priority to Distance Learning and Telemedicine Grant Program applications proposing innovative projects to address the epidemic in rural communities.

Via GovDelivery, stakeholders of multi-family housing can keep up to date on new policy guidance by signing up for program updates at <https://public.govdelivery.com/accounts/USDARD/signup/10420>. Once you enter your email address on this link, you will automatically be enrolled to receive all general announcements.

**HOW CAN USDA HELP ADDRESS THE OPIOID EPIDEMIC?**

USDA has tools to help rural America respond to the opioid epidemic including:

- Resources for prevention, treatment and recovery
- Programs to build upstream resilience and prosperity for the future

USDA United States Department of Agriculture  
Rural Development

USDA is an equal opportunity provider, employer, and lender.

**Loan Packaging Express**  
VOLUME 1 | ISSUE 1 | DECEMBER 2018

**TEAMS Realize Dreams**

Football season is upon us, and if you have ever watched a game, you know that a football team is comprised of 11 people on the field with specific roles to play. Backing them up are 42 additional players who can be called in to give a team member a rest, or replace an injured player. Additionally, teams have coaching personnel and a significant support staff who manage the field, equipment, wash the uniforms, keep the stadium lights on, and make sure that the "12th man" (the fans), have plenty of concessions and entertainment during breaks in the game.

To be a winning team, each person knows their role and each performs to the best of their ability. Regardless of how skilled the players may be, if the person tasked with keeping the lights on in the stadium decides not to replace the light bulbs... the team won't perform well in the dark; and if the wide receiver decides to run a play that wasn't called in the huddle, the quarterback will throw the ball but no one will be there to catch it and score the winning touchdown.

The most successful teams have defined the roles, trained their team members to perform their roles, and then most importantly, they COMMUNICATE with each other. If play does not work on the field, the team watches the tapes and talks about how to improve the play in the future. If the uniforms are not washed, the equipment manager will call the laundry service and have a conversation to iron out the details so it does not happen again. Without communication, regardless of how talented the individual players are, the team will not realize their dream of a championship.

When packaging applications, there are often many moving parts: the packager is working with an applicant who may be working with a Realtor and a seller; the intermediary is working with the certified packager; the qualified employer; and Rural Development; Self-Help grantees are coordinating supplies and construction schedules with vendors and sub-contractors; Rural Development is working with local code officials and appraisers and obtaining funds for the loan. Each person has a distinct role to play and we all strive to do our best in that role. HB-1-3550, Chapter 3, Attachment 3-A is the document which defines our packaging roles; training can be found on the Direct Loan Application Packagers page, and we all have the responsibility to communicate. If something is not working well – define the issue, make recommendations for improvement, and revise the "play". If the issue is local in nature, talk with your local field or state office. If you are an intermediary or a Technical and Management Assistance (TMAA) contractor, include the national office in discussions, as we may need to share the information with other parties. If you are a Rural Development employee with a question about an application, make sure to include all of the applicable players: applicant, packager, and/or intermediary.

By communicating with each other, we resolve issues, improve program delivery, streamline processing and most importantly, assist customers to achieve their dream of homeownership. We may not walk away with a championship ring, but working as a team, we will leave a legacy of affordable housing in our communities.

Thank you for your efforts to provide affordable housing opportunities in rural areas. If you have questions or suggestions, please contact me at (360) 999-0251 or by email at Tammy.Repine@wdc.usda.gov.

**Tammy Repine**  
SFH Finance and Loan Analyst, USDA

*"I just love my life here!" — Katherine Courtney*

The 502 program is a lifeline for low-income families in eastern Kentucky. Katherine Courtney is just one example of how 502 program assistance is making life better for families there.

**Inside this issue:**

TEAMS Realize Dreams.....1	Homeownership Education Works...3	Oregonians Get Housing Help.....4
USDA Spotlights.....2	Pathfinder in Indiana.....3	Self-Help Never Felt So Good.....4

# Trade and Foreign Agricultural Affairs

## Foreign Agricultural Service

Representing the Trade and Foreign Agricultural Affairs, the Foreign Agricultural Service (FAS) continues to deliver the most candid communications and concise information to the public and its business customers/stakeholders via its website, <https://www.fas.usda.gov/>. From inviting visitors to “stay connected,” providing access to the latest reports, or presenting up-to-date agency news, our customers are no more than a click away to accessing vital information. FAS persistently restricts lengthy text and articles; eliminates unnecessary acronyms, abbreviations, and jargon; and utilizes more tables, infographics, and photographs to improve communication with the public and ensure all researchers are aware of FAS’s collective accomplishments.

The volume of information available on the FAS website is the result of many hours of editing and collaboration between public affairs staff and subject matter experts from various program offices. This assures a product that is informative and useful to industry experts, FAS employees, interrelated Government Agencies, and novice readers worldwide. FAS’ public affairs team also edit and/or enhance the graphs, tables, and charts in each report to verify readability, interpretation, and adherence to proper data visualization standards. By applying plain writing best practices, the public affairs staff provides a cohesive story and valuable information on the success of our programs and the benefits to U.S. agriculture.

Through the use of imagery, infographics are an effective means to provide context to our programs. The Philly Cheesesteak is a favorite of ours in the social media space during National Sandwich Month. The recent U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement has been expanded to provide up-to-the-minute information to interested parties.



## Office of Communications

One of the Office of Communications' (OC) primary functions is editorial review of news releases, publications, op-eds and other materials prepared by USDA agencies. OC hires communications experts based, in part, on their writing and editing ability and experience. USDA policy and procedure require OC staff to review public materials, ensuring adherence to plain writing is built into the process before public release.

OC writers and editors review and clear all publications released to the public for clarity, appropriateness, quality, and compliance with Federal publishing policies. OC press coordinators review publications for accuracy and consistency with departmental programs and policies.

OC coordinators review press releases for clear delivery of messages to intended audiences.

OC speechwriters are also hired for their ability to break down highly technical subjects for non-technical audiences, and plain writing is integral to the process.

OC's digital communications team uses plain language for user interface, allowing users to easily understand content navigation. The site is designed with clarity to ensure users can easily complete tasks. Web communications are organized logically for readers in manageable segments, with carefully considered use of space, alignment, and fonts.

OC's photographers tag and enter meta-data for each image descriptively and in plain language.

OC's 508 compliance coordinator works to ensure posted content is clear, concise, and accessible.

OC's social media manager writes clear, concise sentences using an active voice. Camel case is used for multi-word hashtags, making it easier for readers and screen readers to understand content. The use of hashtags, abbreviations, and acronyms are avoided for accessibility.

## Office of Budget and Program Analysis

The Office of Budget and Program Analysis is updating USDA's Departmental Regulation (DR-1512) on Regulatory Review and Clearance. The DR will use simple, easy-to-follow infographics for our internal USDA customers. With this update, new and

existing USDA regulatory officers and rule writers will quickly get the information they need without having to decipher wordy, often lengthy requirements. The DR was last updated in 1997.

## Office of the General Counsel

Attorney and non-attorney staff participated in a Legal Writing training workshop taught by an outside

provider. Non-Attorney staff participated in a web-based training for Business and Legal writing.

# Office of the Inspector General

As part of our continuing effort to communicate better with the public, USDA's Office of the Inspector General (OIG) continues to improve its design of the Semiannual Report to Congress, one of our most important publications. This document was redesigned according to the principles of plainlanguage.gov.

Beginning in fiscal year 2017, we transitioned to a much more visual look that relied on infographics to convey the same complex material. As you'll see with the Activities Summary/Audit infographic below, OIG has built upon the progress established last year and further streamlined our infographics to provide quick and easy access to vital statistics from the past year.

## OIG Training

Every year, we instruct staff on how to plainly and clearly communicate OIG's work internally to USDA, and externally to the public, shareholders, and Congress. This past year, we presented to approximately 300 employees at three regional professional development conferences. Presentations focused on streamlining business writing (including emails); providing appropriate context to technical reports; offering plain language best practices; and drafting concise summaries on complex audit report content.

KEY OIG ACCOMPLISHMENTS IN THIS REPORTING PERIOD (April 1, 2016–September 30, 2016)*	
<b>Reports Issued</b>	
Number of Final Reports	17
Number of Interim Reports	1
Number of Final Report Recommendations (119 program improvements / 18 monetary)	137
Number of Interim Report Recommendations (0 program improvements / 0 monetary)	0
<b>Total Dollar Impact of Reports at Issuance (Millions)</b>	<b>\$126.5</b>
Questioned / Unsupported Costs	\$10.9
Funds to Be Put to Better Use	\$115.6
<b>Management Decisions Reached</b>	
Number of Final Reports	15
Number of Interim Reports	0
Number of Final Report Recommendations (132 program improvements / 15 monetary)	147
<b>Reports Issued</b>	
	<b>151</b>
<b>Impact of Investigations</b>	
Indictments	454
Convictions	367
Arrests	317
<b>Total Dollar Impact (Millions)</b>	<b>\$101.7</b>
<b>Administrative Sanctions</b>	<b>531</b>
* Throughout this report, we generally round numerical values to one decimal place.	
<b>MANAGEMENT CHALLENGES</b>	
(1) USDA Needs to Improve Oversight and Accountability for its Programs	Related material can be found on pages 1-2, 10, 24-27
(2) Information Technology Security Needs Continuing Improvement	Related material can be found on pages 2, 24, 26
(3) USDA Needs to Strengthen Program Performance and Performance Measures	Related material can be found on pages 8-10
(4) USDA Needs to Strengthen Controls Over Improper Payments and Financial Management	Related material can be found on pages 23-24
(5) USDA Needs to Improve Outreach Efforts	N/A
(6) Food Safety Inspectors Need Improved Controls	Related material can be found on pages 2-3, 6
(7) FNS Needs to Strengthen SNAP Management Controls	Related material can be found on pages 14-16



# Summary

Plain writing is an essential method of ensuring that our customers understand our programs and services and are able to easily retrieve information. In keeping with our commitment, USDA will continue to raise awareness about requirements of plain writing at all levels of the Department. We will ensure processes are in place so that information is clear and concise and readily available for our customers.

Adherence to plain writing principles has helped USDA communicate more clearly and effectively with the customers we serve—the American people. USDA has enjoyed consistent and positive reception for its thoroughness in conveying its programs, services, and public-facing communications in an organized, visually appealing, and understandable format.

USDA maintains this standard of excellence by

- 1) Continuing improvements in technology
- 2) Staying on the cutting edge of web design and using various social mediums to keep our presence “fresh” and to ensure a pleasant and informative online experience for our customers
- 3) Trading wordy, technical and/or legal jargon for simple, clear, and concise language; and, most importantly
- 4) Welcoming feedback from our internal employees and external customers

USDA, again, commits to adhering to the Plain Language Act and providing first class service.

# Appendix A: Plain Language Training Compiled by Course

Course Name	Number of employees trained
Drupal Training Content Strategy, Plain Language, Section 508, and Using Drupal	51
FSIS-Plain Language Writing	14
Introduction to Plain Language	1024
Legal Writing in Plain English - Part 1	9
NRCS Plain Language Webinar	74
Plain Writing Training for OGC	27
Principles of Plain Language	9
The Plain Writing Act	619
Writing in Plain English	15
<b>Total</b>	<b>1842</b>

# Appendix B: USDA Officials for Plain Writing

USDA is comprised of 17 governing agencies and nearly 100,000 employees who serve the American people at more than 4,500 locations across the country and abroad. To lead implementation of the Act and to ensure USDA's compliance with it, a working group of agency representatives was created. These officials ensure that their agency or office uses plain language in public documents.

We are committed at the highest levels to complying fully with the Act. Secretary Perdue recognizes the

importance of using plain language to provide high-quality customer service every day for American taxpayers and consumers.

USDA's Senior Official for Plain Writing:

Ms. Jeanette P. Whitener  
Executive Secretariat to the Department  
Office: (202) 720-7100



## USDA Officials for Plain Writing

Agency/Office	Plain Writing Agency Official	Plain Writing Coordinators
<b>Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights (OASCR)</b>	Winona Lake Scott	Joelle Bowers
<b>Food Safety</b>		
<b>Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS)</b>	Charles Williams	Vince Fayne
<b>Food, Nutrition &amp; Consumer Services (FNCS)</b>	Rich Lucas	Rich Lucas
<b>Marketing &amp; Regulatory Programs</b>	Karen T. Comfort	
<b>Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS)</b>		Ashley Garrigus
<b>Animal &amp; Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS)</b>		Beth Gaston
<b>Natural Resources &amp; Environment</b>		
<b>Forest Service (FS)</b>	Angela Coleman	Kathryn Sosbe
<b>Research, Education &amp; Economics</b>		
<b>Agricultural Research Service (ARS)</b>	JD Wyllie	Mina Chung
<b>National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS)</b>	Sue King	Rosemarie Phillips
<b>Economic Research Service (ERS)</b>	Dale Simms	John Weber
<b>Office of the Chief Scientist (OCS)</b>	Rich Derksen	Rich Derksen
<b>Rural Development</b>		
<b>Rural Housing Service (RHS)</b>		Curtis Anderson
<b>Trade &amp; Foreign Agricultural Affairs</b>	Ellen Dougherty	
<b>Foreign Agricultural Service (FAS)</b>		Joseph Migyanka
<b>Office of Budget &amp; Program Analysis (OBPA)</b>	Andrew Perry	Sam Barkdull
<b>Office of Communications (OC)</b>		Carrie Mitchell
<b>Office of the General Counsel (OGC)</b>	Charlene Buckner	Charlene Buckner
<b>Office of the Inspector General (OIG)</b>	Michael Martin	Melissa Bentley