United States Department of Agriculture

Plain Writing Act Compliance Report 2015

Table of Contents

1. Introduction

USDA'S PLEDGE

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) is committed to improving its service to you 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; or,
- explains how to comply with a requirement that we administer or enforce.

We pledge to provide you with information that is clear, understandable, and useful in every paper or electronic letter, publication, form, notice, or instruction.

In October 2011, Secretary Thomas J. Vilsack issued a memorandum to all USDA employees, emphasizing the importance of using plain language to communicate with all of USDA's customers. You can find this memorandum on the last two pages of this report and at USDA's Plain Writing Web site, at http://www.usda.gov/plain-writing.

THIS REPORT

This report documents USDA's progress to date in complying with the Plain Writing Act. The Act requires that USDA "write all new publications, forms, and publicly distributed documents in a 'clear, concise, well-organized' manner." On July 13, 2011, USDA published its first report, an implementing plan that detailed our goals for plain writing. We published compliance reports in April 2012, 2013, and 2014. This year, we report on how we have built on our prior efforts toward meeting the goals in the Plain Writing Act. You can read USDA's Plain Writing Act implementing report here: http://www.usda.gov/documents/PL-Report-final.pdf. You can read last year's compliance report here: http://www.usda.gov/documents/usda-plain-writing-act-2014-compliance-report.pdf.

USDA OFFICIALS FOR PLAIN WRITING

We are committed at the highest levels to complying fully with the Act. Secretary Vilsack recognizes the importance of using plain language to achieve the goals of President Barack Obama's Open Government initiative, as well as the USDA Cultural Transformation initiative, and our commitment to customer service.

Senior Officials

Our senior official for plain writing is listed below:

Mr. Jerold Mande
Senior Advisor to the Under Secretary for Food, Nutrition, and Consumer Services
Email: Jerold.Mande@osec.usda.gov
Phone: 202.720.7711

Agency Coordinators

USDA is comprised of 17 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.   For a list of agency coordinators, please see Chapter 8 of this report.

2. Sample USDA Communications

INTRODUCTION

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. Also, adherence to plain writing principles has helped USDA in communicating more clearly and effectively with its customers.

SUMMARY OF USDA AGENCY COMMUNICATIONS

The following tables list USDA agency documents that have been produced in a format consistent with plain writing principles. The tables also show the many ways that the use of plain language has assisted the agencies in conveying information to the public.

AGRICULTURAL MARKETING SERVICE (AMS)

Document	Plain Writing Improvements/Expected Impact
Press Releases **Target Audience: Media, General Public** **Audience size: unlimited**	**By using plain language, AMS has ensured that all agency documents are written in a clear, concise, and well organized manner. Our communication materials are easy to understand and written so that all interested parties can comprehend their meaning and impact.**
Blogs **Target Audience: General Public** **Audience size: unlimited**	**See above.**
Tweets **Target Audience: 8,500 people follow AMS on Twitter**	**See above.**
NOP Integrity Quarterly Newsletter **Target Audience: Organic industry stakeholders – Sent to a list of 13,000; with subsequent secondary distribution**	**Number of operations and individuals subscribing to NOP email notification continues to increase; customers report re-distributing articles to their stakeholders.**

USDA Organic Fact Sheets **Target Audience: USDA organic accredited certifying agents (staff at 85 organizations) and certified and candidate organic operations (25,000 currently certified)**	Fact sheets use plain language to explain requirements; verbal feedback is that this leads to greater interest from operations determining whether to consider the organic option.
AMS' Dairy Research and Promotion Programs Annual Report to Congress and other annual reports **Target Audience: U.S. Congress, Dairy Industry, General Public Size: Unlimited**	AMS writes and reviews its annual reports with principles of plain writing, reducing the burden on users, reducing errors and improving customer satisfaction.
AMS' Transportation and Marketing program (TM) Grain Transportation Report (GTR) is a weekly online report that covers developments affecting the transport of grain, both in the domestic and international marketplace. This weekly publication reports on the latest volume and price data for barges, railroads, trucks, and ocean vessels involved in the transport of grain. **Target Audience: Agricultural shippers, grain growers, grain elevator operators, and corporations involved in domestic and international grain trade – distribution directly to 1,210 subscribers; secondary and online distribution estimated at several times the direct distribution number. The home page for the GTR received 5,778 hits in the last year.**	The feature articles in the GTR, which present analyses of current issues in grain shipping, are routinely reposted in whole by trade newsletters and independent consultant reports, including Bloomberg.com, AgFax.com, and dtnProgressiveFarmer.com. A 2012 survey of GTR subscribers revealed a high degree of satisfaction with the latest format and report language among subscribers.

AMS' Agricultural Refrigerated Truck Quarterly (AgRTQ) is an online report that provides a view of U.S. regional refrigerated truckload movements, in terms of volume and rates, to gauge the vital component of truck transportation applied to fresh fruit and vegetable markets. Written portions include Market Insights, Regulatory News and Analysis, and Feature Articles. **Target Audience: Agricultural shippers, fresh produce wholesalers, jobbers, and packers, and related industries. Approximately 1,360 trucking establishments ship refrigerated agricultural products locally or nationally. Direct mailing service began in late 2012. The home page for the AgRTQ is active and is visited.**	**New format for data and reporting has been well received by the public. Subscription list is growing rapidly as availability is becoming known. Regulatory changes and feature articles are important to trucking sector to keep abreast of factors that affect profit margins.**
AMS reports Moving Food Along the Value Chain and Regional Food Hub Resource Guide provide detailed case studies and analyses of strategic business behavior to promote and distribute locally and regionally produced foods, as well as a resource list for practitioners. **Target Audience: Practitioners, industry representatives, local government officials, researchers throughout the United States. More than 6,000 hits on the Web pages since August 2012, along with 1,410 hard copies of the documents distributed at trade meetings and through partners.**	**These documents have been widely circulated and cited by other USDA and Federal agencies as well as nonprofit organizations with outreach programs for economic development.**

AMS guidelines, pre-application guides, evaluation measures, and brochures for the Farmers Market Promotion Program (FMPP), the Federal-State Market Improvement Program (FSMIP), and the Specialty Crop Block Grant Program are delivered online, and are made available at outreach events. Target Audience: Potential applicants to the grant programs, approximately 2,000.	Grants materials have been updated to be more user-oriented. The process is continuing in response to helpful comments from users and external reviewers of the materials.
AMS, Fruit and Vegetable Program News is a newsletter published periodically, and is electronically distributed in the United States and internationally. Each issue highlights tools and resources available to assist our stakeholders promote their fruit and vegetable products. We also discuss timely issues impacting our stakeholders, and explain how we are responding to changing industry needs. Target audience: About 20,000 recipients—including small to large produce growers, packers, distributors, processors, retailers, community-based organizations, professional associations, tribal groups, cooperative extension agents, educational groups, and governments at all levels.	The newsletter is written with plain writing principles to ensure the content is presented in a clear, concise and easy to understand manner.
AMS, Fruit and Vegetable Program, Market News Blogs: Custom Averaging Tool (CAT) Target Audience: General Public Audience Size: unlimited	By using plain language, AMS has ensured that this public document was written in a clear, concise, and well organized manner. The agency's communication materials are easy to understand and written so that all interested parties can comprehend their meaning and impact.

AMS Fruit and Vegetable Specialty Crop Block Grant request for applications, and award terms and conditions are published in the Federal Register, and made available online and at outreach events. Target audience: 56 State Departments of Agriculture	The grant documents are now written in a clear, concise and well organized manner that makes them easier to understand. The documents help interested parties successfully apply for grant funds, and manage awarded funds.
AMS, Fruit and Vegetable Program, Perishable Agricultural Commodity Act brochures were rewritten and revised. Target Audience: Produce Industry and general public Audience size: unlimited	The brochures were revised using plain writing principles. The revised brochures are now better organized and easier to understand.
AMS, Fruit and Vegetable Program, notices, proposed and final rules are published in the Federal Register. The documents relate to marketing orders, market news, and research and promotion programs. Target Audience: Produce Industry, General Public Audience size: unlimited	By using plain language, AMS ensures these public documents are written in a clear, concise, and well organized manner. The Federal Register notices and rules are easy to understand and written so that all interested parties can comprehend their meaning and respond accordingly.

Agricultural Research Service (ARS)/National Agricultural Library (NAL)

Document	Plain Writing Improvements/Expected Impact
Magazines, news releases, semi-technical and non-technical publications, brochures, fact sheets, reports, social media content, and other Web content. Target Audience: Audience varies depending on product (developed for specific programs, projects, and events).	

	More than 200,000 people will visit ARS' Web site and will read ARS information online. This will help create awareness and increase public understanding about ARS research and related findings. Thousands more will read ARS materials disseminated at various events, meetings, and programs. At the NAL, approximately 8 million unique visitors each year will find it easier to locate and use the agricultural information the library provides.

Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS)

Document	Plain Writing Improvements/Expected Impact
Web pages Target Audience: APHIS stakeholders	In February 2014, APHIS launched a new Web site designed to provide information to the public in a clearer, more user-friendly way.
Publications Target Audience: APHIS stakeholders	Increased accessibility and comprehension on complex scientific subjects to APHIS target audiences. Legislative and Public Affairs continues to improve editorial quality and increase plain language use in APHIS publications. In particular, APHIS researched readability standards and related tools in Word and, starting in March 2015, began running readability "checks" on draft text during editorial review to work toward general goals in key areas: active vs. passive voice (less than 10% passive voice, ideally), short average sentence and paragraph length, and overall reading ease. Other editorial focuses in publications include increasing use of the following: personal pronouns, strong verbs, and everyday words and phrases (based on the word suggestions list at plainlanguage.gov).
GovDelivery Stakeholder Registry Target Audience: APHIS stakeholders	Immediate access to valuable information about APHIS. Stakeholders select the type of information they would like to receive, how often they receive it, and the medium by which they wish to receive it (e.g., email or SMS text messages).
Responses to customer inquiries made via the Web ("Ask the Expert")	

	The public now receives succinct, clear responses to inquiries.
Target Audience: The general public Potential Audience: Unlimited	

Economic Research Service (ERS)

Document	Plain Writing Improvements/Expected Impact
Economic research monographs released via the agency's Web site Target Audience: Policymakers, academia, informed laypeople	Increased comprehension and customer satisfaction
Market analysis newsletters released via the agency's Web site Target Audience: Policymakers and commercial agriculture companies	See above.
Amber Waves magazine, available online (www.ers.usda.gov) and for mobile devices at iTunes and GooglePlay Target Audience: Policymakers and informed laypeople	See above.

Food and Nutrition Service (FNS)/Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion (CNPP)

Document	Plain Writing Improvements/Expected Impact
Forms, public notices, funding opportunities, regulations, and Web pages (distributed electronically through the Web—in HTML or PDF format; occasionally by paper) Target Audience: State and local nutrition assistance program operators and stakeholders (Thousands)	FNS has long exercised plain writing standards in its documents. Adherence to these standards has resulted in more efficient clearance (less rewriting), greater comprehension by audiences, better adherence to rules and guidance due to greater clarity, and better customer satisfaction with written work.
Correspondence, press releases, reports, research publications (distributed in hard copy and electronically) Target Audience: Congress, general public, nutrition assistance program stakeholders, research community	See above.

Nutrition promotion materials Target Audience: Nutrition community, general public	See above.
Question and answer, Frequently asked questions, How to, or any other informal guidance documents (distributed through the Web—in HTML, PDF formats) Target Audience: State and local nutrition assistance program operators (Thousands)	State SNAP Notices Initiative In May 2014, FNS released a memorandum providing guidance to States to develop effective notices of denial and terminations for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program's (SNAP) purposes. It then evaluated each State's notices of adverse action and online applications for SNAP. Notices of Adverse Action are particularly important, as they provide the clients with critical information about their benefit allotment and appeal rights. Based on this review, in September, FNS published its "Guide to Improving Notices of Adverse Action," which applies principles of plain writing and offers a clear presentation to these notices. In March 2015, FNS published its guide to "Best Practices for Online SNAP Applications," which includes a section on plain language, and provides a self-assessment checklist to help State agencies provide clear, easy-to-use online applications and notices. Better applications and notices will help ensure accurate and timely decisions on households' SNAP applications and on administrative actions requiring notification of SNAP households.

Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS)

Document	Plain Writing Improvements/Expected Impact
Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) Acknowledgment correspondence, fee waiver denied/granted correspondence, determination correspondence, subpoena response correspondence via U.S. mail Target Audiences: FOIA requestors, consumer advocates, industry associations, news media, regulated industry members, and their representatives.	FSIS has revised template letters using more plain language. Examples include using active voice and shorter sentences, explaining technical issues, and eliminating wordiness.

FOIA Expedited processing denied/granted correspondence, submitter's notice correspondence, absent fee agreement/ over $250 correspondence, referral correspondence, Privacy Act correspondence via U.S. mail Target Audience: • FOIA requestors and other agencies • Privacy Act requestor: External individual doing business with FSIS	As FSIS writes and reviews letters, the specialists and supervisors use plain language.
Correspondence (General), letter via U.S. Mail or email Target Audience: Members of Congress; consumer and industry groups; Federal, State, and local officials; meat, poultry and processed egg products establishments; consumers; and members of the public.	As FSIS writes and clears letters, writers and editors use plain language. Examples include using active voice and shorter sentences, explaining technical terms, eliminating wordiness, and writing to the specific audience. Also, FSIS has revised standard language to incorporate plain language.
Campaign Correspondence, letters via U.S. mail or email Target Audience: Members of the public; activists.	When writing responses to campaign letters, FSIS gives extra attention to plain language. These responses are relayed to thousands of constituents who have a wide variety of reading levels and knowledge of the issues.
Constituent Update, newsletter via electronic means Target Audience: Consumers, regulated community, public officials	Plain language is an ongoing effort for the Constituent Update. FSIS continues working with subject matter experts on technical content without compromising the message. FSIS rewrites text into plain language, and reviews and rewrites its text in order to ensure that the message is correct.
Approximately 100 fact sheets on individual topics, such as Beef from Farm to Table, and Refrigeration and Food Safety. FSIS revises approximately 20 fact sheets each year via Web, email, and in-person events. Target Audience: Consumers (8,153,292)	FSIS will continue to produce additional food safety education materials in plain language. It will also continue to review and revise its current stock of materials to ensure that they contain factual, up-to-date scientific information, and are written in plain language.
Consumer Guides distributed via Web, email, in-person events, and U.S. mail, including the following: • Kitchen Companion: Your Safe Food Handbook, booklet	This is part of a project in which FSIS developed Plain Language Fact Sheets, and published those Fact Sheets by posting them to the applicable agency Web sites so that the public can access information easily.

• Cooking for Groups: A Volunteer's Guide to Food Safety, booklet • Food Safe Families Activity Book, booklet • Let Me Tell You How Dad Got Sick!, booklet • Is It Done Yet?, brochure; Todo Cuenta, brochure • Ask Karen, magnet • Panic Button, fact sheet • Protect Yourself and Your Baby From Listeriosis, flyer • Food Safe Families, poster • Is It Done Yet? temperature chart, poster • He's BAC! children's book, booklet Target Audience: Consumers	
The Meat & Poultry Hotline Web page houses valuable information about how to reach the Hotline. Target Audience: Consumers (1,810,640)	FSIS uses plain language when it updates its Web site regularly to include information on recalls and food safety-related issues/concerns.
Food Safe Families public service announcements (4); Food Safe Families Behavioral videos (4); Surviving a Power Outage: Don't be in the Dark When it Comes to Food Safety podcast; Food Safety Advice for Tailgating Parties video news releases; Freezing and Food Safety, American Sign Language videos via Web, media Target Audience: Consumers	This is part of a project in which FSIS developed Plain Language Fact Sheets, and published those Fact Sheets by posting them to applicable agency Web sites so that the public can access information easily.
Web content Target Audience: All customers (internal and external)	FSIS Web Managers often work with content contributors on draft documents and share their knowledge of best practices. To introduce new content, FSIS writes descriptive introductory text with a clear call to action. The agency emphasizes using fewer words, active voice, and few acronyms to achieve plain language.
Web Content: Limited English Proficiency (LEP)	FSIS recently added links to the Civil Rights main page to these LEP resources: the FSIS LEP plan, a training Webinar sponsored by USDA's Office of General

Target Audience: Government employees	Counsel, and "I Speak" cards used by the U.S. Census Bureau.
Intranet Content Contributors Quick Start Guide Target Audience: FSIS Employees	The guide was created as a training aid to help content contributors manage content on InsideFSIS, the employee Intranet. FSIS reviews that document periodically to include any updates in the system and to ensure its ease of use for its contributors.
Green Initiative (GI), Web (FSIS Notice)	Documents are in bulleted formats, directly to the point (less verbiage), and easy to read. The GI helps in reducing waste by making documents within the agency reader friendly.
Quarterly Enforcement Report via electronic means and posted on FSIS' Web site Target audience: FSIS personnel and external stakeholders, including consumer advocates, industry associations, regulated businesses, and Congress	FSIS reviewed the Quarterly Enforcement Report against plain writing principles and updated the report with the Office of Public Affairs and Consumer Education for the Web audience.
Confidential enforcement and legal correspondence, letters via paper; electronic means Target audience: Individuals and firms engaged in operations involving FSIS-regulated products	FSIS worked with consultant trainers to develop templates and examples and has incorporated plain language into daily writing.
Review of State Meat and Poultry Inspection (MPI) Programs Summary Report; individual state reports, Report via paper; electronic means	A clearer message has been delivered, and fewer follow-up questions have been received from all interested parties.
Official Annual State MPI Comprehensive Review and Determination Reports, letter via paper; electronic means	The annual report process is being streamlined. The report length has been reduced from 13-15 pages to 3-4 pages, and plain writing concepts have been incorporated. This eliminates wordiness and delivers a clearer message.
Domestic Audit Checklist, FSIS Form 5000-9, form via paper; electronic means	Language on audit checklists has been simplified to capture the most relevant information and ensures more accurate records are kept.
Official clarification memos to State MPI programs, letters via paper; electronic means	FSIS clarified concepts and adjusted wording to save time due to fewer questions from the programs, resulting in a quicker response from the State programs.
International Audit Report, electronic means	Plain language has improved the readability of the audit and establishment report. Eliminating the number of pages and utilizing plain language has resulted in a streamlined report, which delivers a clearer message to the general public.

International Audit Establishment Checklist	Language on audit checklists has been simplified to deliver accurate information and ensure a consistent audit process.
Official responses to appeals, letters via paper; electronic means	Official responses have been streamlined to deliver a clearer message, which results in fewer follow-up questions.
Litigation-related documents	Plain language legal writing has improved readability and comprehension.

Foreign Agricultural Service (FAS)

Document	Plain Writing Improvements/Expected Impact
News Releases and other postings on agency Web site Target Audience: The general public and media representatives Potential Audience: Unlimited	Improved understanding and clarified terminology.
Responses to customer inquiries made via the Web Target Audience: The general public Potential Audience: Unlimited	The public continues to receive concise, clear responses to inquiries.
Briefing Papers Target Audience: Senior-level Department officials Potential Audience: 25	Improved clarity and brevity.
Comments to the World Trade Organization Target Audience: International trade officials Potential Audience: Unlimited	Prepared clear, results-oriented, and diplomatic comments to encourage countries to modify their proposed regulations in a manner that facilitates trade.

Forest Service

Document	Plain Writing Improvements/Expected Impact
Documents/communications of all kinds Target Audience: service users, national forest visitors, businesses, contractors, students, landowners, partners, non-governmental organizations, and so forth; millions	In August 2011, the Forest Service identified the kinds of documents that are covered by the Plain Writing Act. Covered documents fell into 23 categories, including forms, correspondence, forest plans, environmental analyses, and research papers and publications. Next, the Chief's Office issued a data call, asking staffs across the country to estimate the number of covered documents in existence and the number produced or substantially revised each year. Approximately 590,000 documents existed, including more than 30,000 research publications available online, and the Forest Service generated about 64,000 covered documents per year. In the winter of 2014 and again in the spring of 2015, the Forest Service Chief's Office contacted Plain Writing Act coordinators across the country to review and reconfirm the kinds of documents covered under the Plain Writing Act. The coordinators also reconfirmed the estimated numbers of covered documents in existence and generated each year. **There were no significant changes from the last time an assessment was done in 2011-12.** Some units have reported positive results from the emphasis on plain language, including improved communications, positive public feedback/response, and a reduction in the number of public questions and need for follow-up.
Forms, distributed by mail/Web sites/offices Target Audience: Service users, national forest visitors; thousands	There is ongoing use of guidelines under the Plain Writing Act. • The Eastern Region has provided templates for outreach documents to be used in the pre-hiring process. The templates are edited for plain language. • In the Pacific Southwest Region, staff on the Inyo National Forest in California reviews all forms provided to the public for compliance with plain writing guidelines. o A recent review and redesign of a Forest

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visitor's guide simplified language and made the document less text-heavy.

- o All documents, both paper and digital, are reviewed on a regular basis to ensure that the message is easy to read.
- o The Forest Service has observed positive results from the emphasis on plain writing, including a reduction in the number of questions from the public and need for follow-up.
- The Human Resources Management Budget and Finance staff used the principles of plain writing to revise several forms used in the hiring process and SF-52 processing.

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Grants, distributed by mail/Web sites/offices

Target Audience: Businesses, students, landowners

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There is ongoing use of guidelines under the Plain Writing Act.

In the Southern Region, for example, the Forest Service reduced technical jargon in grant applications, increasing the chances of receiving grant funding for needed projects.

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Agreements, distributed by mail/Web sites/offices

Target Audience: Community organizations, non-governmental organizations, other agencies, other partners; thousands

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There is ongoing use of guidelines under the Plain Writing Act.

In the Southern Region, for example, the Forest Service simplified the language in Challenge Cost Share and other agreements, resulting in better understanding of the agreements between parties.

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Contracts, distributed by mail/Web sites/offices

Target Audience: Businesses, contractors; thousands

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There is ongoing use of guidelines under the Plain Writing Act.

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Requests for information (RFIs), requests for proposals, etc., distributed by mail/Web sites/offices Target Audience: Businesses, contractors; thousands	CORs continue working to simplify language in RFIs and RFPs. For example, in the Pacific Southwest Region: • An employee from the Regional Office Acquisition attended the Regional Office's 2-day Plain Writing Training course hosted by the Regional Public Affairs staff. • On the Plumas National Forest in California, a district timber officer works with his sales administration staff to ensure that text in contract language and daily logs is clear.

Brochures, distributed by mail/Web sites/offices
 	
Target Audience: Service users, national forest visitors; thousands
	There is ongoing use of guidelines under the Plain Writing Act.
	
	For example:
	
	• The Washington Office reviews all national Web site postings for compliance with plain language guidelines.
	• The Southern Research Station prepared three brochures on topics of interest to land managers, along with 11 brochures and informational cards highlighting forest research. The writer/editors had training in plain writing.
	• In the Rocky Mountain Region, the Arapaho National Forest prepared a brochure on osprey viewing and management, in accordance with the principles of plain writing and good design and layout.
	• In the Eastern Region—
	   o All external content for the regional Web site is edited for brevity and compliance with Plain Writing Act guidelines. No information is posted without review.
	   o Any print materials intended for public use are reviewed at the unit level, followed by a regional review prior to submitting for printing approval. Reviewers use visual standards as well as Plain Writing Act guidelines.
	• In the Pacific Southwest Region, brochures and Web postings are reviewed for compliance with the Plain Writing Act.
	• In the Southern Region, new and revised brochures are being written in plain language that is easily

	understood by the target audience; some brochures are redesigned to provide information at a glance, and some include smart infographics. A new brochure for Land Between the Lakes improves audience understanding of the recreation facility. • The Alaska Region prepared a series of short documents for non-technical users based on longer documents for technical audiences. The leaflets and brochures distill the information into a less technical, more readable format based on the principles of plain writing.
Interpretive signs, located at facilities and on trails, roads Target Audience: National forest visitors; thousands	Ongoing use of guidelines under the Plain Writing Act. In the Pacific Southwest Region: • Forest interpretive signs and the 50th Wilderness Anniversary exhibit products were designed using Plain Writing Act principles. • Forest interpretive information is enhanced with photos or charts. • The Cleveland National Forest in California developed and installed three interpretive signs utilizing the principles of plain writing. About 10,000 visitors will see the signs each year. In the Southern Region: • New signs at the Daniel Boone National Forest in Kentucky show fewer words with more impact; signs are being designed to fit their location; and trail information depicts what the audience wants and needs to know. • A new map/sign in Land Between the Lakes will be installed in May to improve visitor understanding of recreational and learning opportunities. The Alaska Region prepared a large interpretive sign for the Anchorage airport. Based on the principles of plain writing, the designers reduced the number of words on the sign from 847 to 468.
Descriptions of services, distributed by mail/Web sites/offices	

Target Audience: Service users, stakeholders, local citizens; thousands	There is ongoing use of guidelines under the Plain Writing Act. • The Southern Research Station has an online educational resource page providing visitors with easy-to-read materials highlighting Forest Service information and research. • The Human Resources Management staff delivers regular system status updates—e.g., eSafety, Electronic Performance Management, and USAJobs—to keep employees informed of system updates so they are aware and can plan ahead. The updates are edited for plain language.
Instructions, distributed by mail/Web sites/offices Target Audience: Service users, contractors, employees; thousands	There is ongoing use of guidelines under the Plain Writing Act. • The Albuquerque Service Center makes every effort to create clear and concise internal documentation, ranging from briefing papers and standard operating procedures to internal Web sites and emails. For example, staff clarified the process for receiving disbursements by writing a simple procedural document that included links to Web sites and YouTube videos, walking the user through parts of the disbursement process. • The Human Resources Management staff maintains a Blackboard page informing employees how to receive updates on the Albuquerque Service Center's operating status. The instructions are edited for plain language. • In the Southern Region, hundreds of Web pages have been edited to simplify messages and improve content for readers. Agency jargon has been replaced by plain language.
Rules/regulations, distributed via Web sites Target Audience: Partners, contractors, stakeholders, employees; thousands	There is ongoing use of guidelines under the Plain Writing Act.
Management plans, distributed by Web sites Target Audience: Partners, contractors, stakeholders, employees; thousands	There is ongoing use of guidelines under the Plain Writing Act. In the Pacific Southwest Region: • Land management plan amendments on the

	Los Padres National Forest in California are evaluated using Plain Writing Act principles before the final documents are posted on the Web. • The Regional Forest Plan Revision Team has identified environmental justice as a concern in public outreach and is reviewing public information materials in relation to this issue in compliance with Plain Writing Act principles. In the Southern Region, management plans and communication plans are outlined and organized in sections with appropriate headings, making information easier to find.
Project descriptions, distributed by Web sites Target Audience: Partners, contractors, stakeholders, employees; thousands	There is ongoing use of guidelines under the Plain Writing Act. • In the Rocky Mountain Region, the Roosevelt National Forest issued a one-page flyer notifying stakeholders and local citizens of a planned prescribed fire. The flyer was written in plain language. • The Southern Research Station created an interactive Climate Change Exhibit Web site to enhance the Climate Change Exhibit located at the Cradle of Forestry on the Pisgah National Forest in North Carolina. Visitors can explore the exhibit virtually. The designers of the Web site received training in plain writing. • In the Pacific Southwest Region, the forest hydrologist program manager on the Plumas National Forest works with staff to ensure that Plain Writing Act principles are used to simplify the Forest's science-based reports. • In the Southern Region, the Daniel Boone National Forest is planning National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) training for the fall of 2015 that will include information about the Plain Writing Act and how to write better project descriptions for public review.
Environmental analyses, distributed via Web sites Target Audience: Partners, contractors,	

stakeholders, employees; thousands	There is ongoing use of guidelines under the Plain Writing Act. - In the Pacific Southwest Region, NEPA documents on the Cleveland National Forest are reviewed and edited by a District Ranger who has received Plain Writing training. - In the Alaska Region, the Chugach National Forest released a final environmental impact statement for public review that was reviewed by a professional writer/editor for adherence to plain writing principles and formatting for Web viewing.
Decision documents (e.g., on plans, projects), distributed by mail/offices and posted on Web sites Target Audience: Partners, contractors, stakeholders, employees; thousands	There is ongoing use of guidelines under the Plain Writing Act. - In the Pacific Southwest Region, decision documents on the Cleveland National Forest are reviewed and edited by a district ranger who has received plain writing training. - In the Southern Region, the Daniel Boone National Forest is planning NEPA training for the fall of 2015 that will include include information about the Plain Writing Act and how to write better decision documents for public review.
Press releases, distributed by fax and posted on Web sites Target Audience: Journalists, stakeholders, employees; thousands	There is ongoing use of guidelines under the Plain Writing Act. - At the Southern Research Station, the media relations officer prepared 15 news releases based on the principles of plain writing. - In the Pacific Southwest Region, press releases are posted on the regional/forest public-facing Web site, with more in-depth information linked to the press release. All are reviewed for plain language. - In the Southern Region, all press releases are written in active voice and inverted pyramid style. Acronyms, technical terms, and agency jargon are avoided in order to achieve clarity.
Research publications, distributed by mail/ offices and posted on Web sites Target Audience: Scientists, managers,	

employees; thousands	There is ongoing use of guidelines under the Plain Writing Act, as appropriate for the purpose of the publication and the intended audience.
	- The Northern Research Station produces the *NRS Research Review*, a quarterly summary on a single research topic. The language is tailored for a general audience, explaining the science and its significance to the public in accessible language. The text is reviewed by professional editing staff. - The Southern Research Station publishes *CompassLive*, an online magazine that condenses complex research publications/research journals into easy-to-read articles. All complex research terms are defined and explained, in part, through the use of links.
Letters, distributed by mail/email Target Audience: Service users, national forest visitors, partners, stakeholders; thousands	There is ongoing use of guidelines under the Plain Writing Act. - The Human Resources Management staff updates employees on all aspects of human resources management, including benefits, pay, systems, hiring, and processing. The updates are edited for plain language. - In the Southern Region, letters and memos in response to public inquiries, including congressional and Freedom of Information Act requests, are written in plain, succinct language. The intent of the letter is addressed in the first sentence or paragraph so readers immediately know the topic of communication.
Reports, distributed by mail/offices and posted on Target Audience: Scientists, managers, employees, other agencies, partners, stakeholders; thousands	There is ongoing use of guidelines under the Plain Writing Act. - In the Pacific Southwest Region, regional and forest staff review documents provided to the public via mail/Web sites/offices to ensure compliance with Plain Writing Act principles. - In the Southern Region, scientific reports that are released to the public are edited by a public affairs specialist to convert technical language into plain language.
Speeches, delivered in person/posted on Web sites	

Target Audience: Varies (general public, stakeholders, students, etc.); thousands	There is ongoing use of guidelines under the Plain Writing Act. • In the Washington Office, a professional writer/editor tailors speeches to the audience, using the appropriate language. • The Human Resources Management staff ensures that presentations at all-employee meetings are clear, concise, and easy to understand. • In the Southern Region, a public affairs specialist reviews and edits public speeches and presentations to tailor the language to the audience, ensuring that key messages are clear and prominent.
Papers/articles, distributed in journals, made available on Web sites Target Audience: Scientists, managers, employees, partners, stakeholders; thousands	There is ongoing use of guidelines under the Plain Writing Act. The Human Resources Management staff provide updates in plain language to keep employees well informed.
Briefs, posted on Web sites Target Audience: Managers, employees, other agencies, partners, stakeholders; thousands	There is ongoing use of guidelines under the Plain Writing Act. • In the Pacific Southwest Region, regional and forest staff review documents provided to the public via mail/Web sites/offices to ensure compliance with Plain Writing Act principles. • The Human Resources Management staff created a simple briefing paper on new hiring processes posted on an internal Web site.
Testimony, delivered in person/posted on Web sites Target Audience: Congress, partners, stakeholders; thousands	There is ongoing use of guidelines under the Plain Writing Act, as appropriate for the purpose of the publication and the intended audience.
Legal documents, available on Web sites Target Audience: Partners, contractors, stakeholders, employees; thousands	There is ongoing use of guidelines under the Plain Writing Act, as appropriate for the purpose of the publication and the intended audience.

Farm Service Agency (FSA)

Document	Plain Writing Improvements/Expected Impact
"One-stop shopping" Web pages. Target Audience: Farmers and ranchers (both new and existing), the general public, environmental groups, commodity organizations. One-stop 2014 Farm Bill Web Page at www.fsa.usda.gov/farmbill FSA Disaster Assistance Programs at http://www.fsa.usda.gov/programs-and-services/disaster-assistance-program/index FSA conservation compliance at www.fsa.usda.gov/compliance FSA farm loan programs at http://origin.www.fsa.usda.gov/FSA/webapp?area=home&subject=fmlp&topic=landing FSA conservation programs at www.fsa.usda.gov/conservation FSA safety net programs at www.fsa.usda.gov/dairy and www.fsa.usda.gov/arc-plc	Interested parties can quickly locate succinct, easy-to-read information about the provisions of the 2014 Farm Bill, related changes in FSA programs, and how FSA is implementing those provisions.
More Succinct Fact Sheets With the enactment of the 2014 Farm Bill, simpler fact sheets have been developed for use by customers, at outreach meetings, on the FSA Web site, in emails, at field offices, and by other outlets. All relevant farm program fact sheets are now provided electronically at www.fsa.usda.gov/factsheets	

Target Audience: Farmers and ranchers, the general public, employees, environmental groups, commodity organizations, beginning farmers, potential FSA borrowers, others. FSA StrikeForce information is at www.fsa.usda.gov/strikeforce Target Audience: Previously underserved farming and ranching customers located in persistent poverty counties. Farm Loans information is available at the links below: Micro Loans http://www.fsa.usda.gov/programs-and-services/farm-loan-programs/microloans/index Youth Loans http://www.fsa.usda.gov/FSA/webapp?area=home&subject=paca&topic=you Target Audience: Small and niche operators; beginning farmers and ranchers.	This is the first time that FSA statistics have been unified into one location rather than distributed among the individual Web pages authored by FSA "divisions." This approach is designed to increase the understanding of FSA programs that can provide financial assistance to traditionally underserved farmers and ranchers in key rural areas designated as persistent-poverty regions. These resources increase awareness of available funding to targeted groups. Provides farmers and ranchers with an overview of FSA farm loan programs.
Clearer forms, program directives, handbooks, and related communications Target Audience: Farmers and ranchers, the general public, employees, environmental groups, commodity organizations, beginning farmers, potential FSA borrowers, others.	When plain language is used, no special training or experience is necessary for new customers to understand if they are eligible for FSA programs, thereby helping to improve access to these services. For example, the new microloan program has celebrated its first anniversary; its popular demand illustrated the success of reduced application requirements and simplified forms far more suited to smaller types of operations.
Easier-to-Read News Releases Target Audience: General public, media, farmers and ranchers, private landowners, beginning and socially disadvantaged producers, others, trade associations, and commodity or environmental groups.	News releases are now written to communicate to readers who are not familiar with FSA programs. "Agency-speak" terminology that often is used internally to reference processes unique to the agency is replaced with plain language. This also includes assistance in educating non-agricultural audiences of the importance of USDA programs.
Newsletters that are more focused on farmer and rancher needs. In the past, some FSA county newsletters	

tended to rely on local information that did not adequately communicate with producers about new programs, sign-up deadlines, and other important content. HQ public relations staff developed a template and provided counties with information focused on program assistance that could be tailored to county-specific disaster, lending, and other needs. Target Audience: Farmers and ranchers, the general public, employees, environmental groups, commodity organizations, beginning farmers, potential FSA borrowers, others.	Now, a "template-based" approach is used, employing universally reviewed content, so that FSA information is more unified, clearer, and reflective of the perspective of the customer rather than of internal operations.
Public Service Announcements FSA has recently provided information on program signup, county committee elections, and its new microloan program. Target Audience: Distributed through radio and television, these announcements reach farmers and ranchers, the general public, employees, environmental groups, commodity organizations, beginning farmers, potential FSA borrowers, others.	These announcements are now written in brief, succinct, and generalized language so that no specialized pre-existing knowledge of existing programs is necessary to understand and appreciate the importance of the information disseminated through these announcements.

Grain Inspection, Packers, and Stockyards Administration (GIPSA)

Document	Plain Writing Improvements/Expected Impact
GIPSA Web site - Equipment Web page Target Audience: All users and manufacturers of GIPSA-Certified Grain Inspection Equipment within and outside the Official inspection system.	Increased clarity of information for a broad audience and a balance between highly technical details and policy and procedure by using Frequently Asked Questions, tables, and segmenting information.
GIPSA Web site – Test Kit Evaluation Target Audience: All users and manufacturers of GIPSA-Certified Mycotoxin Rapid Test Kits	Use of tabular information to identify approved test kits and duration of approval for ease of reference.
Brochure on GIPSA Web site – Growers' Rights in Poultry Growing Arrangements	

Target Audience: Poultry growers	New brochure explaining what poultry growing arrangements are and discussing the rights poultry growers have in those arrangements under the Packers and Stockyards Act, 1921. In order to make the content easier to read, headings were used; "you" was used when referring to the audience, and bullets were used, as well.

National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS)

Document	Plain Writing Improvements/Expected Impact
A comprehensive package of materials conveying information and communicating results of the 2012 Census of Agriculture. These tools help support public understanding of statistical data. NASS developed several products to help its non-statistical audiences better understand and use its data. Early in 2012, NASS created a modern, user-friendly Web site for the 2012 Census of Agriculture, providing compehensive information about the Census, encouraging participation, and addressing any issues that arose or might arise during data collection. Since then, NASS has continued to improve and build upon the Web site. The agency made available many usable, accessible materials to support Census data collection efforts, including the following: English and Spanish brochures; news releases; logos, Web buttons, videos, and public service announcements; sample blogs; feature stories; and newsletter articles. In addition, NASS wrote cover letters, background information, reminder letters, and postcards to encourage census recipients to respond. In 2013, NASS transitioned from the data	

collection phase to data release. In February 2014, USDA Secretary Vilsack provided a preliminary data preview and launched a countdown to the final census release. A Highlights feature, NASS' first set of infographics, and regular tweeting at the event and throughout the 10-week countdown engaged a broader audience than usual. For the final release in early May, NASS created an even broader range of materials written plainly and directly with the end user in mind, just as it had during the prior phases.

The Census of Agriculture Web site itself is easily navigable, providing direct access to the full data reports, Quick Stats (the searchable database on which anyone can retrieve NASS data), and the ancillary products featuring top findings from those reports. These products include news releases, blogs, static and interactive maps, infographics, topical Highlight documents, and more—all written in a plain, clear style to expand the reach of Census findings beyond regular data users.

New this year is an infographic series. The first item, "U.S. Agriculture at a Glance," released in February 2014, was immediately popular. Prepared using plain writing principles, this infographic provided data in an easy-to-understand way. Beginning with the data release in May, NASS issued several thematically grouped sets of infographics starting with a series to address the most common questions asked by the public about farming and ranching, the "Who, What, How, and Where" of U.S. agriculture www.agcensus.usda.gov/Partners/Infographics/. To connect with local audiences, NASS also issued one infographic per week for 50 weeks, featuring agriculture data for

each State, accompanied by a blog by NASS' State statistician in that State.

NASS also revamped the Census "fact sheet" format to be a more accessible, easier-to-read, high-cut summary of topical Census data. All together, NASS has issued 26 Highlights featuring topical summaries of Census data. Topics include key economic and demographic data; profiles of American Indian, Asian, Black, Hispanic, and women farmers; farmers markets and other local production; aquaculture; irrigation; family farms; use of farmland; and key livestock and crop commodities, among many other topics http://www.agcensus.usda.gov/Publications /2012/Online_Resources/Highlights.

NASS also provided more than 250 static maps in five broad categories to download and use www.agcensus.usda.gov/Publications/2012 /Online_Resources/Ag_Atlas_Maps. Many of these maps are also available as dynamic maps that help users visualize, download, and analyze Census of Agriculture data in a geospatial context. The instructions for accessing and using these maps are written in clear, plain language www.agcensus.usda.gov/Publications/2012 /Online_Resources/Ag_Census_Web_Maps /Overview/.

The Quick Stats database contains the results of the Census and NASS surveys but can be hard to decipher. NASS launched a tutorial video to help new users access the information in April 2014. It remains available on YouTube www.youtube.com/watch?v=y- 9CAmhMRi0&feature=youtube_gdata. At the same time, NASS posted a glossary explaining some of the more difficult terms

and will add more items over time. Written in clear, plain language, the video script and glossary terms help guide users through NASS' Quick Stats database. The video script was edited and prepared to ensure the tutorial communicated technical instructions in an easily understood step-by-step manner. The first of its kind for NASS, the tool was provided to the public to help them learn how to search, access, and download Census and NASS survey data.

The Census of Agriculture data include detailed information for statisticians about data reliability and Census methodology. NASS includes plain, clear language about this in their general publications, conveying the concept without the detail. The agency added a section on Census methodology to the Census FAQ page of the Web site to provide the public with easy-to-understand answers to their questions regarding Census methodology and data reliability www.agcensus.usda.gov/Help/FAQs/General_FAQs/#3. A blog issued prior to the preliminary data release http://blogs.usda.gov/2014/02/06/how-does-ag-census-work also addressed Census methodology.

NASS also undertook a number of focused information campaigns around key events or Census data sets.
- To provide complicated statistical information about agriculture to NASS' youngest audiences, K-12 students, it created a mini-campaign to highlight "Where Does the Food on MyPlate Come From?" Using Census data, maps, information from the USDA MyPlate program, and plain writing principles, NASS created a poster and blog to serve as a resource for teachers and help educate students on where food

items in the five food groups are produced in the United States.

- Most recently, NASS undertook a multipronged effort to highlight new Census data on farm typology and family farms. The campaign consisted of NASS employees' roots as family farmers along with a news release, infographics, tweets, and a Highlights document—all featuring the strength and role of family farmers. Using plain writing principles, NASS compressed the 700-plus page Typology report into the "Top 5 Facts to Know about Family Farms" and presented them in fun and interesting ways for the general public.
- NASS used social media to make the information more broadly accessible through clearly written blogs posted on Facebook and clear, frequent Twitter posts.

Target Audiences: Policymakers, stakeholders, community-based organizations, academics, media, farmers and ranchers, and the general public. Members of these groups have varying levels of experience with Census and NASS data, but, for many, the collateral materials that help make the data understandable and accessible are the primary source of information.

The Census of Agriculture Web site, infographics, Highlights, and other materials created for general use all convey in accessible terms (appropriately for the product) the data and complex methodology that is part of the Census report. All of these items help frequent, occasional, and first-time users understand and use NASS data. The challenge in discussing precise statistical data in popular, readable terms is to convey complex nuanced information in ways that have broad appeal and interest. As a statistical agency concerned with precision but aware of the need to reach a broad audience, NASS works constantly at achieving this balance.

During this period, NASS made the Census Web site increasingly transparent and easy to navigate. Throughout the data collection period, NASS provided up-to-date information and clarifications in response to issues that arose from incoming calls or from enumerators reporting from the field. When data collection closed, NASS transitioned to providing notification on when results would be available and other measures to continue to engage agriculture producers and other data users. Visitor traffic to the Census Web site increased 70 percent during the month of the Census data release.

The various tools and documents, individually and together, helped to give a broad range of users easy access to the more than six million data items in the Census. These materials are expanding NASS' data user community and helping it become more engaged with the agency.

Immediate results indicating improved outreach, ease of understanding, and access to information were increased audiences, news stories using and citing NASS data, Web hits to the data, and re-use of infographics and written materials to tell the story of U.S. agriculture. Some results by the numbers are below:

- By the end of the year, more than 5,000 media stories cited NASS or Census data;
- Infographic images have been viewed more than 50,000 times and continue to generate a lot of interest on both Facebook and Twitter;
- A series of maps from a Census poster, "Where Does the Food on MyPlate Come From," has been

	viewed more than 24,000 times on Flickr; and
	• Two stories featuring census data on local foods and renewable energy that NASS wrote for wire service distribution have been picked up and published by a combined 5,000-plus local outlets.
Marketing materials (cover letters and background sheets) to promote survey participation. These materials accompany the individual surveys mailed to producers. Since 2012, NASS has revised the materials for each survey to speak more directly to those it is asking to respond. As NASS plans each survey, it continues to make improvements to speak more directly to respondents, asking them to participate and telling how the survey results benefit them. Background sheets describe in simple, clear terms what the survey is, how to respond, NASS confidentiality regulations, and whom the information benefits. This year, NASS also started incorporating cognitive research into some survey planning activities to test the messaging of its marketing materials. For two surveys, NASS tested pre-suvey and reminder letters, as well as postcards that were mailed directly to respondents. The agency incorporated changes to the language based on the research findings. Target Audience: Respondents (most often agricultural producers or businesses) NASS asks to participate in surveys. NASS conducts more than 400 such surveys per year—some reach a few hundred; others reach hundreds of thousands.	Increased comprehension and customer satisfaction. NASS now writes these materials in a direct, clear style with the recipients' concerns in mind: what producers want and need to know.
Web pages of individual programs. NASS has rewritten some of its more complex program Web pages specifically to be more accessible to a wider range of users. NASS also created new pages for new survey programs such as the Current	

Agricultural Industrial Reports Survey, a new monthly survey program the agency has started (once conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau). These new pages are written in plain language to provide quick access to key information and monthly data on this new NASS survey program. Target Audience: All users.	NASS plans to do more of this as the opportunity arises in the short term, especially with even more new survey programs on the horizon. NASS is also in the process of conducting a usability study, getting feedback from users on the features that help and hinder Web access. After the usability study, NASS will work with an appropriate outside contractor to reorganize and rewrite the Web site to be even more directly accessible and reader- and user-friendly.
News releases, Agricultural Statistics Board Notices, a new series of short publications http://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/Highlights/index.asp, and one-off publications such as an agency brochure, program brochures, etc. Target Audience: Press and the general public	NASS has long focused on writing these core products for a broad audience but is giving extra attention to key plain writing principles. The agency writes all such publications using plain, direct language.
Tweets, Facebook, and blog posts. NASS began a year-long series of weekly blogs in May 2014, featuring Census of Agriculture data on the 50 U.S. States. Focusing on one State per week, the series ended in May 2015, having highlighted both large-scale agriculture and interesting snippets about lesser known specialty commodities, thereby lending color and character to the U.S. Census agriculture data. The series was posted on the USDA Blog and USDA Facebook page for maximum reach and sharing. NASS also continually tweeted out data and information on Twitter using the #AgCensus hashtag. The tweets increased engagement with followers and provided data to many new and expanded audiences in a quick and easy-to-digest manner. Target Audience: Social media users, including more than 22,000 people who currently follow NASS on Twitter.	NASS used clear and direct writing principles for all its social media communications. After the first week of the Census release, Twitter posts reached 5.8 million impressions. In addition, the #AgCensus hashtag was used more than 1,700 times in one week, and NASS received more than 250 retweets during that time. During the year following the Census release, NASS has established more than 6,000 new Twitter followers, expanding and engaging a larger audience. In 2014, NASS tweets surpassed 11 million impressions and have been re-tweeted more than 3,200 times.
Infographics. Commonly seen in communications today, infographics are used to help communicate complicated or	

detailed statistical information in an easily understandable manner. Following the success of the Census of Agriculture infographics, NASS began to create topical infographics featuring NASS survey data around holidays and other targets of opportunity. Examples include, Halloween Sweet Stats (with production data on sugarcane, apples, and peanuts), Thanksgiving by the Numbers (with data on the foods farmers grow for the Thanksgiving meal), and Happy Holidays! (featuring data on ingredients in the much loved and maligned fruit cake). Target audience: A broader public than NASS usually reaches with its agriculture and farm data.	NASS used plain language writing principles for its infographics, focusing on short, simple text, and creative graphics and illustrations to display the data. The infographics were primarily designed for use on social media where the expected impact was successfully achieved. Of these holiday infographics, key results include the Halloween infographic reaching more than 112,000 impressions in a few hours and being named one of the Top Most Influential Government Tweets for October 31, 2014, by Measured Voice. The Thanksgiving infographics reached 300,000 Facebook users.

Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)

Document	Plain Writing Improvements/Expected Impact
Annual Reports Distributed through: Direct mail, employee Intranet, public Web site, email; displayed in office; distributed at events, Target Audience: Employees, public, agricultural producers Potential Audience: Unlimited	No acronyms are used unless they are spelled out in first use. Use of simplified sentences, reduction in use of technical terms when there is an alternate (easier-to-understand) word, will result in better understanding of conservation programs.
Banner Stands/Displays/Exhibits Displayed at events, meetings, conferences, and expos Target Audience: Agricultural producers, employees, potential employees, agriculture producers, conservationists, private landowners Potential Audience: Unlimited	No acronyms used unless defined; fewer words and more visuals are used, resulting in better understanding of conservation programs.

Booklets and Publications Made available in offices, distributed at an event, and on a public Web site Target Audience: Public, employees, agricultural producers, conservationists, private landowners Potential Audience: Unlimited	Reduction in use of technical terms when there is an alternate (easier-to-understand) word, more visuals, updated examples and better instructions. Publications are easier to read, resulting in fewer questions about programs and policies.
Conservation Initiative Reports Target Audience: Public, employees, agricultural producers, conservationists, private landowners, government officials	Clear, concise writing, making it easier for people to understand NRCS' programs and benefits of soil conservation to ecosystems, the water supply, air and water quality, and wildlife habitat.
Correspondence Distributed through: Direct mail, email Target Audience: Public, employees, agricultural producers, conservationists, private landowners, government officials Potential Audience: Unlimited	Letters are more direct, and clear, common language is used more. There is better understanding of the content, resulting in fewer questions and a better comprehension of NRCS' programs and policies.
Direct Mail Distributed through: Direct mail Target Audience: Public, employees, agricultural producers, conservationists, private landowners Potential Audience: Unlimited	Using more familiar words, which allows for a better understanding of programs, resulting in an increase in program participation and a reduction in questions.
Directives Distributed through: Email, employee Intranet, Web site Target Audience: Employees Potential Audience: 10,379	Clarity of message, better understanding of procedures, fewer questions, overall savings due to greater efficiency.
Emails, tweets, blogs and other social media Distributed through: Emails	

Target Audience: Employees, public, agricultural producers, partners Potential Audience: Unlimited	Clear, concise writing, making it easier for people to understand benefits of soil conservation programs.
Fact Sheets Distributed through: Email, direct mail, public Web site, and handed out at events Target Audience: Unlimited	Using more familiar words, allowing for a better understanding of programs, resulting in an increase of applications and a reduction of questions.
Feature Articles/Success Stories Distributed through: Public Web site, blogs, email, media Target Audience: Public, agricultural producers, employees, conservationists, private landowners Target Audience: Unlimited	Shorter, clearer messages enable better comprehension of subject.
Guidance/Handbooks for Program Applicants Distributed through: Public Web site, email, public events, employee Intranet, and direct mail Target Audience: Public, employees, agricultural producers, conservationists, private landowners, government officials Potential Audience: Unlimited	Reduced use of jargon, technical terms, and acronyms without definitions. Clearer guidance for program implementation, application process, and program compliance requirements.
Legislative Fact Sheets Distributed through: State Web sites, events, email Target Audience: Public, Congress, agricultural producers, employees, conservationists, private landowners, government officials Potential Audience: Unlimited	Consolidated, concise language about conservation activity and programs provides clear, useful information about conservation by State.
National Bulletins	

Distributed through: Employee Intranet, public Web site Target Audience: Employees Potential Audience: 10,379	Employees have a better understanding of organizational decisions, resulting in fewer questions.
National Instructions Distributed through: Employee Intranet, public Web site Target Audience: 10,379	Clear instructions and information provide employees with better understanding of processes and expectations in order to achieve effective and efficient program management.
News Releases and Media Advisories Distributed through: Traditional media, social media, public Web site, email, events, State and National Web sites, partner Web sites Target Audience: Agricultural producers, conservationists, private landowners, general public Potential Audience: Unlimited	Clear writing provides better understanding by the public and employees alike of the importance of conservation generally and NRCS conservation programs in particular.
Newsletters Distributed through: Email, public Web site, employee Intranet Target Audience: Employees, public, agricultural producers, conservationists, private landowners, government officials Potential Audience: Unlimited	Articles are written in plain language, communicating NRCS' success partnering with landowners to implement conservation practices. Text is easy to read, clear, and concise.
Posters Displayed in offices, public events, and employee meetings Target Audience: Public, employees, agricultural producers, conservationists, private landowners, government officials Potential Audience: Unlimited	Clear message displayed through design and graphics for ease of reading and comprehension of conservation programs and accomplishments.

PowerPoint® Presentations Distributed through: employee meetings and events; public meetings and events Target Audience: Public, employees, agricultural producers, conservationists, private landowners, government officials Potential Audience: Unlimited	Shorter and more concise presentations allow for more information sharing.
Practice Standards Distributed through: Employee Intranet, public Web sites Target Audience: Public, employees, agricultural producers, conservationists, private landowners, government officials Potential Audience: Unlimited	Using less scientific and more direct and simplified language to help program participants and applicants to better understand the requirement standards for program implementation.
Public Service Announcements Distributed through: Radio, TV, YouTube, partner Web sites Target Audience: Public, agricultural producers, conservationists, private landowners, government officials Potential Audience: Unlimited	Using clearer language, NRCS is able to reach broader and more diverse, historically underserved communities with information about conservation and conservation programs.
Resource and User Guides Distributed through: Employee Intranet, public Web site Target Audience: Employees, public, agricultural producers, conservationists, private landowners, government officialsPotential Audience: Unlimited	Clear language describing practices and procedures promotes a greater understanding of processes and fewer questions.
Snow Survey Reports Distributed through: Employee Intranet, public Web site, email Target Audience: Employees, public,	

agricultural producers, conservationists, private landowners, government officials Potential Audience: Unlimited	Reporting data in a clear, concise manner with less technical jargon makes it easy to understand.
Soil Survey Reports Distributed through: public Web site, Intranet, email Target Audience: Employees, public, agricultural producers, conservationists, private landowners Potential Audience: Unlimited	Reporting data in a clear, concise manner with less technical jargon makes it easy to understand.
Speeches and Talking Points Target Audience: Employees, public, agricultural producers, conservationists, private landowners	Communicating data and information in a clear and concise manner using less technical jargon so the audience can understand the topics.
Technical Notes and Reports Distributed through: public Web site, employee Intranet, direct mail Target Audience: Public, employees, agricultural producers, conservationists, private landowners, government officials Potential Audience: Unlimited	Less technical jargon is used, and all acronyms are defined. Language is more consistent and easier to understand.

Rural Development (RD)

Document	Plain Writing Improvements/Expected Impact
The Rural Housing Service distributed Plain Writing publications throughout the department and to its customers.	Staff and customers were able to communicate better and build stronger relationships.

Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights (OASCR)

Document	Plain Writing Improvements/Expected Impact
Uniform Complaint Form Target Audience: USDA employees and the public	

	OASCR has ensured that all agency documents are written in a clear, concise, and well organized manner. The agency's communication materials are easy to understand and written so that all interested parties can comprehend their meaning and impact.
One Page How-to Guide on How to File a Program Complaint Target Audience: Public	This was created to clearly explain in direct terms the process by which a USDA customer who feels they have been discriminated against can file a program complaint.
Correspondence (General), letter, via U.S. mail or email Target Audience: Members of Congress and members of the public	As OASCR writes and clears letters, writers and editors use plain language. Examples include using active voice and shorter sentences, explaining technical terms, eliminating wordiness, and writing to the specific audience.
Postings on Agency Website Target Audience: General public	Improved understanding and clarified terminology.

Office of Budget and Program Analysis (OBPA)

Document	Plain Writing Improvements/Expected Impact
Departmental Regulation 1512 – Regulatory Decision Making Requirements (USDA internal guidance for the drafting, requirements, and clearance of departmental rulemakings proposed for publication). Target Audience: All USDA agency regulatory writing and coordination offices. Ultimately, this could be useful and beneficial to the public (and USDA) by improving the clarity of USDA's published rulemakings, particularly with rulemaking preambles that are to be written in a manner that is "simple and easy to understand" as required in OMB's "Final Guidance on Implementing the Plain Writing Act of 2010."	The 1512 regulation is currently being revised. The current draft revision incorporates the Plain Writing Act as a requirement for USDA reviewers when reviewing all significant departmental regulations for programmatic accuracy and completeness. In addition, the current draft revision incorporates the Office of Management and Budget's Final Guidance on Implementing the Plain Writing Act of 2010, requiring that rulemaking preambles be written in a manner that is "simple and easy to understand."

Office of Communications (OC)

Document	Plain Writing Improvements/Expected Impact
National Press Releases Target Audience: The general public	OC does final review for plain language of agency-written releases that convey information of national importance to consumers, those in agricultural industry, academia, the press, and other stakeholders.
Media Advisories Target Audience: Selected media	OC alerts media outlets to upcoming USDA events and news announcements in direct language/media coverage.
Communications like USDA "Results" Fact Sheets/ Farm Bill Fact Sheets/ Farm Bill materials and information Target Audience: The general public	OC conveys facts in plain language and in succinct format, resulting in increased comprehension and customer satisfaction.
Captions on photos posted to USDA's Flickr site on the homepage Target Audience: Press and general public	OC writes clear captions that concisely convey the event behind the photo/photos and captions that may be reproduced by media and others.
Web pages, including USDA's homepage, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and blogs Target Audience: The general public	OC presents Web pages and social media in plain, conversational language so that these communications are informational and engaging, resulting in increased comprehension, public accessibility, and customer satisfaction.
Secretary/Deputy Secretary speeches posted to "Transcripts and Speeches" section of USDA Web site. Target Audience: Specific stakeholders, interest groups, and general public	OC writes speeches on complex subjects in clear, direct language, resulting in increased comprehension of USDA messages and customer satisfaction.
Publications Target Audience: Public stakeholders and policymakers	OC does final review for plain language of all agency-written publications released to the public, resulting in increased comprehension and customer satisfaction
Text accompanying radio stories and audio and video content posted to USDA Web site and text accompanying videos posted to YouTube Target Audience: Specific stakeholders and the general public	OC writes clear summaries of stories and interviews, resulting in increased comprehension and accessibility for the general public and for broadcast media that may pick up stories and audio and video content.

Text accompanying exhibits, displays, and signage prepared for agency use in visitor centers, conferences, and other outlets Target Audience: Specific stakeholders and the general public	OC captions and summarizes display information in plain language, resulting in increased comprehension and customer satisfaction.

Office of the Chief Information Officer (OCIO)

Document	Plain Writing Improvements/Expected Impact
Communication materials, publications, forms, and correspondence developed and released by each of the eight OCIO offices are available and accessible to employees and the public through OCIO's public-facing Web sites. Target Audience: OCIO policy directives, guidance, and correspondence developers, and individuals that manage Department-wide functions. Serves approximately 60 internal users, the general public, and media representatives. The potential audience is unlimited.	OCIO's practice is to apply Plain Writing principles and guidelines to its documents, letters, notices, and other written material. OCIO updates and revises its directives and guidance using these principles to ensure that they are readable and understandable.
Posted Plain Writing Resources on USDA's Web site—this is a public-facing Web page that can be viewed and utilized by any OCIO employee and the general public. Target Audience: All writers and reviewers of departmental documents. Approximately 500 users	The Plain Language checklist and writing guide are now part of the process to create and review OCIO documents, resulting in increased knowledge of departmental policy and guidance. Clear, concise writing and the use of graphics without the use of jargon results in better understanding of OCIO's mission, objectives, and goals. OCIO strives to implement a common approach to bringing clarity and consistency to its new or revised correspondence, documents, and Web sites.

Office of the Executive Secretariat (OES)

Document	Plain Writing Improvements/Expected Impact
Secretarial correspondence and reports Target Audience: Congress; local, State, and international governments; stakeholders; and the general public	OES reviews all secretarial correspondence and reports requiring the Secretary's approval to ensure that the materials are clear, concise, and well organized.

Office of the General Counsel (OGC)

Document	Plain Writing Improvements/Expected Impact
Accessible Electronic Documents Target Audience: All OGC employees	Increased Accessibility of documents
OGC Highlight, distributed through email Target Audience: OGC employees and USDA staff	OGC has prepared a newsletter that is written in a clear and concise manner for OGC employees in order to highlight significant legal issues, programs, and events; to introduce new employees; and to facilitate employee involvement.
Correspondence	OGC assists USDA agencies in reviewing and editing of responses/letters that are clear and more succinct.

Office of the Inspector General (OIG)

Document	Plain Writing Improvements/Expected Impact
OIG produces documents that it makes available to the public on its Web site (http://www.usda.gov/oig/index.htm). OIG's written products include audit reports, its semi-annual reports to Congress, as well as its management challenges, annual plans, testimonies for Congress, and other documents. Target Audience: USDA, agencies, Congress, and the general public	OIG has always strived to communicate plainly, clearly, and directly. The Plain Writing Act provides resources and a means to formalize those efforts, and also reinforces the necessity of clear communication.

3. Plain Writing Outreach to USDA Employees

INTRODUCTION

Successful implementation of the Plain Writing Act requires a workforce that is well-informed about the principles of the Act. USDA's agencies have made considerable efforts to convey the importance of plain writing to their employees.

EMPLOYEE OUTREACH: ACTIONS TO DATE

The following lists show examples of awareness strategies within agencies regarding the importance of plain writing.

Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS)

- AMS organized a Plain Language Team consisting of the Agency's Senior Plain Writing Official and Plain Writing Coordinators from each of the Agency's Program areas that produce the most covered documents, including regulations.

- AMS has developed and deployed its own Plain Language Intranet site to raise employee awareness about the Plain Writing Act and its requirements. The site also contains resources that employees can refer to when preparing and reviewing documents for public distribution and use.

- The AMS Administrator sent an email to all employees informing them about the Plain Writing Act of 2010, and the Agency's commitment to communicate with our stakeholders, partners, and the public using the principles of Plain Language.

- AMS' Transportation and Marketing (TM) Program has developed plans to institute regular meetings for managers of cooperative research agreements to develop a consistent format for progress reports and to increase the number of research outputs that are written in Plain Language. The TM Writer-Editor conducts reviews of materials and provides immediate feedback to authors on the Plain Language requirements.

Agricultural Research Service (ARS)/National Agricultural Library

- ARS has also initiated a pilot Story Circle writing exercise (10 weeks, 1 hour/week) with some of its scientists to aid researchers in honing their writing skills (of plans, reports, etc.). If successful, an internal campaign will be developed to spread the word and make this training available to other agency scientists.

- From January to September 2014, NAL staff conducted an audit of all Web content. Checking for plain language was a requirement of the process. Plain language guidelines were provided to all staff to be used in their content revisions as a result of the audit.

Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS)

- APHIS provides Intranet writing guides for all staff members, including information about the Plain Writing Act, guidelines, checklists, online courses, and tools to achieve the Act's requirements.
- The agency emphasized the importance of plain language by sharing the results of USDA/APHIS' 2013 Plain Language report card with all APHIS employees on the agency Intranet via a recorded audio message. The message talked about the importance of plain language to an informed electorate and the agency's ability to successfully accomplish its work.
- In November 2013, APHIS granted an interview with three agency staff members for a *Baltimore Sun* news article about plain writing in the Government; the story discussed APHIS' strides in the area of plain language by showcasing Legislative and Public Affairs' (LPA) work on Hungry Pest publications and other agency efforts.
- In March 2014, APHIS' Publications Editor created a one-page handout, "Plain Language Tips for Publications," for LPA staff and attended a Public Affairs staff meeting to distribute the handout, discuss/promote plain language initiatives, and answer questions. This effort sparked even more focus and awareness staff-wide on plain language and further supported plain writing at APHIS.
- On several occasions, APHIS plain language advocates have discussed plain language at staff meetings with agency scientists.
- APHIS Public Affairs included the "Introduction to Plain Language" AgLearn course as required staff training for public affairs specialists in FY 2014.

Economic Research Service (ERS)

ERS discussed the Act with the agency's trained and professional editors who review every item before it is released. ERS has also included plain writing training in its presentation training, media training, and writing training sessions for employees. ERS has also developed and distributed a thorough writing guide for the agency's economists *(Writing Research Reports @ ERS)*. This guide is also available on ERS' agency Intranet.

Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS)

- FSIS promoted and pilot tested a plain language writing checklist that was targeted toward FSIS' Office of Investigation, Enforcement, and Audit. The list was distributed and used to write, review, and enhance written communications office-wide. FSIS posted information on plain language and requirements of the Plain Writing Act on the Office of Program and Policy Development SharePoint® site.
- FSIS has incorporated plain language writing concepts into its performance standards. FSIS has also promoted a plain language writing checklist that is targeted toward FSIS' Office of Investigation, Enforcement, and Audit. The list has been distributed and is used to write, review, and enhance written communications office-wide.

Foreign Agricultural Service (FAS)

FAS has communicated with USDA employees through FAS Intranet announcements, all-employee emails, and the FAS public Web site http://www.fas.usda.gov/.

Forest Service (FS)

- The Chief of Staff, acting on behalf of the Forest Service Chief, appointed a national coordinator for Plain Writing Act implementation. The coordinator is a professional writer/editor who works for the Chief's Office, drafting speeches and other documents for the Forest Service Chief. Two more national coordinators volunteered to help, both professional writer/editors—one in the Forest Service's national Office of Communication, and the other in the agency's national office for Research and Development.

- The Chief of Staff, acting on behalf of the Forest Service Chief, sent a memo directing the Forest Service's top executives nationwide to designate field coordinators for implementing the Plain Writing Act. The executives chose public affairs directors at the regional office and research station level, who, in turn, coordinated with local field offices.

- The Chief's Office works directly with the public affairs directors and with staff directors in the Washington Office, regularly sending out information on the Plain Writing Act and requesting information on Plain Writing Act implementation.

- To help communicate about the Plain Writing Act and to make related resources available, the Chief's Office set up a Plain Writing Act Web page on the Forest Service's Intranet Web site. On the Web page, the Chief's Office has posted a checklist prepared by USDA, tailored to Forest Service needs, to help writers use plain language.

- The Chief's Office also announces progress in implementing the Plain Writing Act through "People, Places, and Things," a monthly newsletter for all employees, and through the Forest Service's online blog for the general public.

- In updating the Forest Service's Plain Writing Act Web page, the Chief's Office added a link to the kinds of Forest Service documents and other materials that are covered by the Plain Writing Act.

- USDA's online training program, called AgLearn, has more than a dozen writing-related training courses that employees can take, most of them 1-hour long. The Forest Service's coordinator for Plain Writing Act implementation personally took 13 writing-related AgLearn courses and briefly described each one in a summary page linked to the Forest Service's Plain Writing Act Web page.

- The Forest Service's local and regional coordinators for Plain Writing Act implementation have been notifying employees of the Plain Writing Act and its requirements.
  - The Albuquerque Service Center added a link to the USDA Plain Writing Web page from its CFO Employee Web page.
  - The Northern Region (Montana, the Dakotas, and northern Idaho) held a workshop for Public Affairs Officers on how to communicate Plain Writing Act requirements to seasonal and field employees. The regional office regularly reminds staffs about guidance available for Plain Writing Act implemention, with links to the guidance on the Region's internal Web sites.
  - In the Rocky Mountain Region (Central Rocky Mountains)—
    - The Grand Mesa, Gunnison, and Uncompahgre National Forests have posted AgLearn courses to help employees find training opportunities in plain writing.
    - The Arapaho and Roosevelt National Forests and Pawnee National Grassland have posted links to plain language information.

- o In the Pacific Southwest Region (California and the Pacific Islands)—
  - ▪ The Regional Office sent notification of Plain Writing Act requirements to all Regional Leadership Team members and public affairs officers, along with a link to writing-related AgLearn courses. The Region's public affairs staff continues to notify employees of the Plain Writing Act and its requirements.
  - ▪ The public affairs officer on the Inyo National Forest works with staff officers and district rangers to ensure compliance with Plain Writing Act requirements and to communicate the availability of training opportunities through AgLearn for employees.
  - ▪ The Los Padres National Forest in California emphasizes plain writing in all of its messages, both internal and external, and encourages writing-related educational development for employees through the AgLearn program.
  - ▪ In the Eastern Region (the Northeast and Upper Midwest), the Public and Government Relations staff in the Regional Office stresses the need for other staffs that write briefing papers and other documents to follow Plain Writing Act guidelines using materials on the USDA Plain Writing Act Web site.
- o The Alaska Region emphasized plain writing and Plain Writing Act requirements in two job outreach brochures and in an outreach storyboard for its Web site.
- o At the Forest Products Laboratory (FPL), plain language processes incrementally put in place are bearing fruit. Much of the outreach and communication that reaches the agency's desks is already in very readable form. The relentless messaging from supervisors to keep it simple wherever possible is taking root. The FPL Office of Communications takes the approach that science is only as good as the people who understand it.

Farm Service Agency

FSA reviewed and updated 2014 Farm Bill external communications to staff and customers. Efforts were undertaken to conform to plain writing principles in 2014 Farm Bill documents, including fact sheets, notices, Web-based communications, and associated materials. Ongoing monitoring of these materials occured to ensure that updated information is provided on a periodic and systematic basis. Careful attention was paid to avoid oversimplification of technical terms where such efforts may change the accuracy of the meaning of such terms, or the interpretation of such terms by specialized audiences.

Grain Inspection, Packers, and Stockyards Administration (GIPSA)

- From December 2014 to January 2015, GIPSA conducted training for 20 employees and 20 supervisors and managers who regularly use writing for their jobs. The training covered standard grammar and writing issues that are common concerns of both groups. The agency also discussed writing for your audience. As an outcome, GIPSA identified writing resources such as the Government Printing Office and the Plain Language writing Web site, which participants were encouraged to use.
- In the April newsletter for agency employees, the agency provided an announcement to all employees about writing resources, including the Plain Language writing Web site.

- Where appropriate, GIPSA encourages employees to complete classroom writing classes; three employees took regulatory writing with the Regulatory Group.

National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS)

- NASS distributed a memo from the Administrator, along with direction to use the NASS Plain Writing Checklist (issued October 2011).
- NASS created a Web page on the agency Intranet that provides information on the Plain Writing Act and directs staff to resources available at http://www.PlainLanguage.gov and http://www.usda.gov/plain-writing. (Now on SharePoint, the internal Web page was created October 2011.)
- The NASS internal Web page contains a series of one-page quick tips on key aspects of the Plain Writing Act, expanding on elements in the Plain Writing Checklist. These were distributed periodically to all staff via email. Additional tips were distributed through the weekly leadership memo to field staff and published in Round-Up, the agency internal newsletter and blog, and were distributed through email and the weekly leadership memo to field staff.
- In 2014, the agency provided guidance to Headquarters and field staff on how to write Highlights, fact sheets, and other outreach materials about the 2012 Census of Agriculture in clear, direct language. As States created customized Census products, this helped to expand the emphasis on plain writing from national publications to State publications, as well.
- Throughout the year, statisticians from across the agency had the opportunity and need to write information in a more general style (in the form of Highlights, infographic vignettes, articles, PowerPoint presentations, and summaries). Working with the Public Affairs Office staff, they learned to consider what the reader is looking for and how to report on the data using fewer, less technical words.
- In 2015, NASS hopes to involve statisticians in producing some of the same kinds of materials and language in reports about its regular agricultural surveys as used in reporting about the Census. This will include a data visualizatiaon project to communicate survey results more clearly, sets of infographics for another collection of statistical reports, and online and printed Highlights for some surveys.

Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)

- The agency distributed a National Bulletin (NB 130-13-1) to all employees, outlining the requirements of the Act and requesting data and updates nationwide.
- NRCS provides plain writing resources and training to writers.
- The agency updated its Correspondence Manual to include a section, with resources, dedicated to plain writing.
- The NRCS Plain Writing team communicates regularly with Public Affairs Specialists, Executive Correspondence Management Team members, administrative staff, and agency leadership in order to maintain an ongoing dialogue about the importance of plain writing and to provide plain writing resources.
- Maintains an ongoing dialogue about the importance of plain writing to effective implementation and management of conservation programs.

- Added a Plain Writing Coordinator to the agency's Plain Writing team.
- NRCS had a top-level, daylong meeting June 11 on Correspondence Improvement. Plain Writing was central to the agency's discussion about improving correspondence generally.
- A Plain Writing link will be placed on the NRCS home page the second week of July.

National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA)

- The agency worked with senior leaders to require all NIFA employees who work with grants to complete plain writing training via AgLearn.
- NIFA edited Requests For Applications templates to ensure compliance with the Act.
- The agency trained members of the Web Team and Web Team Unit Liaisons in plain writing.
- Also, NIFA trained three new members of the Communications Staff (CS), two CS interns, and two CS contractors in plain writing.

Rural Development (RD)

- The Rural Housing Service (RHS) Administrator sent an email to all RHS employees, reminding them of the importance of using plain language in all of their communications and the impact it can have on the agency's programs.
- Information about plain language resources was also circulated.
- Staff was offered the opportunity to meet with Plain Writing Coordinators for a review of plain writing language, compliance, and the agency expectations when working with the public.
- RHS is working with Plain Writing Coordinators to design a workshop for staff that will provide additional Plain Writing techniques, tools, and resources for the workplace; improving the quality of communication with the public and those that the agency serves.

Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights (OASCR)

- All OASCR documents are reviewed and edited by the Plain Writing Official and Plain Writing Coordinator to ensure compliance with the Plain Writing Act.
- OASCR staff is encouraged to take writing training via AgLearn.
- OASCR distributes information about the Act in staff meetings and via email blast.

Office of Budget and Program Analysis (OBPA)

OBPA sent several links to share information to help its users find training and learn more about Plain Language last year.

Office of Communications (OC)

- *Digital Communications*
  As the manager of the USDA.gov portal, OC provides guidance to USDA's 17 agencies, plus offices, through the Web Council and Social Media communities. OC provides guidance for optimized use of various Web and social media channels, which includes using plain language and a conversational tone through popular social media tools, including Facebook and Twitter.

OC also maintains a centralized USDA Blog featuring stories and updates from each mission, agency, and office. Through the New Media Strategic Plan, OC provides guidance to USDA communicators writing blog posts to use plain language and to avoid bureaucratic jargon, legalese, and overuse of acronyms.

- *Press and Editorial*
  OC works closely with agencies in the final review of news releases and publications.

Office of the Chief Information Officer (OCIO)

- OCIO regularly informs employees via email and other bulletins, and has subsequently trained employees in the Office of Policy & Fair Information Practices, Information Resource Management, and Enterprise Management, on specific plain writing practices, techniques, and expectations.

- OCIO developed and deployed its own plain language Intranet site to raise employee awareness about the Plain Writing Act and its requirements. The Web site also contains resources that employees can refer to when preparing and reviewing documents for public distribution and use, such as the Plain Language Writer's Checklists and Plain Language Reviewer's Checklists. The Intranet site also contains USDA's Plain Writing Implementation Plan, and the Plain Writing Compliance Reports for 2011, 2012, 2013, and 2014. Multiple Plain Writing training resources are available through this site, as well as through AgLearn, the Department's one-stop portal for employee training.

Office of the Executive Secretariat (OES)

In late 2014, OES wrote and distributed a correspondence manual to all USDA agencies/offices that emphasizes the use of plain language in the Secretary's correspondence. The manual also includes a plain language writer's checklist, reviewer's checklist, and training resource list. OES staff regularly provide guidance on clear writing to agency staff via email, telephone, and in-person meetings. OES also provides feedback to the agencies on revisions made by OES to specific agency-prepared documents.

Office of the General Counsel (OGC)

OGC plans to publish an article in its OGC Highlights newsletter that outlines information about Plain Language and to list writing courses in AgLearn.

Office of the Inspector General (OIG)

OIG informed their entire workforce about the Plain Writing Act via email. Regarding reference material that employees use when writing, OIG has also incorporated links to the Act's resources.

4. Training

INTRODUCTION

In order to implement the Plain Writing Act successfully, USDA's workforce must be trained. USDA's agencies have provided many opportunities for employees to become educated about plain writing principles

WHO WE'RE TRAINING

Training in plain writing principles is available to USDA employees; thousands have been educated.

HOW WE'RE TRAINING THEM

Both online and in-person training have been provided.

Agricultural Research Service (ARS)/National Agricultural Library (NAL)

Training/Date	Employees Trained
AgLearn *Plain Writing* Training Module Date: Ongoing since 2013	2,714 ARS employees
In-house Training with the Nielsen Norman Group Dates: March 25 & 26, 2014 Facilitated in-house training on Top Web UX Design Guidelines and Complex Web Content at NAL. The sessions covered the importance of plain language in creating Web content. Plain Language Workshop (GSA) Date: June 26, 2014 Web Management Coordinator completed a half-day session on the Plain Writing Act of 2010.	25 NAL Web content developers

Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS)

Training/Date	Employees Trained
In-house face-to-face training Date: Ongoing	Approximately 185 employees have taken and passed intensive courses with 9 hours of in-class time and 6 hours of homework. Of these employees, more than three quarters have taken two additional courses with 7 hours of in-class time and 4 hours of homework. Each of these classes includes extensive exercises and feedback on in-class work and homework. The American Council on Education reviewed the courses, and students who have taken and passed all three are eligible for two undergraduate semester credits Approximately 500 people took face-to-face writing courses that highlighted plain writing principles.
Online training Date: Ongoing	APHIS recommended sets of online training (AgLearn)—APHIS employees have taken 3,103 of these courses.
Writing coaching Date: Ongoing	APHIS is pilot testing a Virtual Writing Center where trained volunteers coach staff members who want one-on-one feedback on their writing.

Economic Research Service (ERS)

Training/Date	Employees Trained
Plain writing segment at Writing for Economists training Date: November 2014	13
Plain writing segment at Writing for Economists training Date: January 2015	13

Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS)

Training/Date	Employees Trained
In house (agency Staff or contractor)	All Office of Investigation, Enforcement, and Audit, Enforcement and Litigation Division, Federal State Audit Branch Office of Management (All Minneapolis offices)
Training document for Intranet content contributors written in plain language to assist users. Date: November 4, 2011 to Present	
Webinars and online training	
Introduction to Plain Language (Online Course)	
Business Writing: How to Write Clearly and Concisely (Online Course)	
Investigation Report Writing Best Practices: Effective Reports (Writing Clear Reports) (Instructor-led Course) OIEA	

Foreign Agricultural Service (FAS)

Training/Date	Employees Trained
New Desk Officers Writing Briefing Papers	15
New Employees Writing Clear Comments to the World Trade Organization	20
Junior Employees Participating in Year-long Training Submit Weekly Papers That are Critiqued for Substance and Style	25

Forest Service (FS)

The Forest Service works with APHIS to provide professional training in writing through plainlanguage.gov. The Forest Service has a professional trained through plainlanguage.gov, who offers half-day courses to other agencies in the principles of plain writing. In 2014, the Forest Service's Plain Language instructor trained more than 200 people in other agencies and worked on a small interagency team that is revamping the training module used by plainlanguage.gov.

Training/Date	Employees Trained
In September 2011, in response to a data call, Forest Service staffs across the country identified employees involved in writing documents covered by the Plain Writing Act. The Forest Service estimated that about 1,500 employees, as a major part of their jobs, wrote or edited documents covered by the Act. Of these, about 1,200 employees were believed to need further training. Forest Service staffs responded by offering training in various forms. Date: Various, 2011-14	1,500
The Chief's Office recommended that all Forest Service employees consider adding at least one plain writing course to their individual development plans. Employees could take advantage of training opportunities through USDA's online AgLearn program, which includes more than a dozen online modules, such as "Introduction to the Plain Writing Act" (30 minutes); "Business Writing: How To Write Clearly and Concisely" (1 hour); and "Business Grammar: Common Usage Errors." Forest Service staffs committed about 1,200 employees to take at least one writing-related training course. Date: Various, 2012-14	1,500
Forest Service staffs routinely offer writing-related training to their employees, including the following:	
In house (agency staff or contractor) Date: Ongoing	ca. 90 (Controlled Correspondence staff, Washington Office)—periodic informal training by professional writer/editors.
In house (agency staff or contractor) Date: Ongoing	ca. 200 (Northern Research Station [NRS] scientists)—Regular CSD Alerts to all NRS employees about communication procedures and issues, including topics related to grammar and plain writing.
External training Date: March 26, 2015	1 (Human Resources Management)—How to Become a Better Communicator, seminar.
Plain Language instructor Date: November 13, 2014	28 (Washington Office staffs)—half-day training in the principles of plain writing.
Plain Language instructor Date: October 29, 2014	18 (Washington Office staffs)—half-day training in the principles of plain writing.

Plain Language instructor Date: September 11, 2014	29 (Washington Office staffs)—half-day training in the principles of plain writing.
External training Date: December 10, 2014	1 (Human Resources Management)—When Bad Grammar Happens to Good People: How to Avoid Common Errors in English.
In house (agency staff or contractor) Date: October 2014	ca. 10 (Lassen National Forest, Almanor Ranger District)—NEPA training, incorporating plain writing concepts.
In house (agency staff or contractor) Date: October 2014	40 (Modoc National Forest)—NEPA training, with a focus on the principles of plain writing.
In house (agency staff or contractor) Dates: July 22-23, 2014	20 (Pacific Southwest Region)—the Regional Office held a 2-day course on plain writing.
In house (agency staff or contractor) Date: 2014	25 (International Programs, Washington Office)—day-long workshop in developing writing skills, including the principles of plain writing.
In house (agency staff or contractor) Date: 2014	40 (Southern Region)—Principles of Plain Language.
In house (agency staff or contractor) Date: 2014	31 (Southern Region)—Writing for Results, Public Affairs Officer conference.
Individual self-taught Date: 2014	1 (Southern Region)—Professional Writing
External training Date: 2014	1 (Southern Region)—Written Communication
In house (agency staff or contractor) Date: 2014	10 (Eastern Region)—Public and Government Relations staff provided training in plain writing for the Air, Water, Lands, Soils, and Minerals regional staff at the request of staff director.
External training Date: 2014	5 (Alaska Region)—Classes in writing based on the principles of plain language.
In house (agency staff or contractor) Date: Since January 2012	Approximately 40 (Employee Relations Specialists, Washington Office)—How to draft charge/penalties writing

In house (agency staff or contractor) Date: Since 8/2011	90 (Business Correspondence staff, Washington Office)
In house (agency staff or contractor) Date: Since 6/2011	84 (Business Correspondence staff, Washington, Office)
In house (agency staff or contractor) Date: Since 8/2010	10 (Policy Analysis staff, Washington Office)—an hour-long seminar in plain writing

Farm Service Agency (FSA)

Approximately 35 key FSA employees have been trained in plain writing.

Grain Inspection, Packers, and Stockyards Administration (GIPSA)

Training/Date	Employees Trained
Over the last year, approximately 40 GIPSA employees completed writing classes. GIPSA published an article on writing and plain language in the GIPSA newsletter in April 2015. GIPSA continues to have ongoing plans to encourage communication improvement both in writing and oral communications, as both these areas are some of the most requested skill development areas on individual development plans (IDPs) in GIPSA for employees, supervisors, and managers. GIPSA plans on conducting one or two Webinars in plain language or writing basics as identified by management. The agency will continue to publicize the AgLearn writing courses.	40

National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS)

Training/Date	Employees Trained
In-house training Date: Ongoing since July 2012	2
Online training Date: Fall/Winter 2011/2012/2013 and continuing	Required of public affairs staff (8 people); promoted as available to all staff

NASS created a 2-hour plain writing workshop, "Writing Plainly and Effectively: Ten Tips to Clearer Writing," for working groups within NASS to take together. The course summarizes key Plain Writing principles in ten tips (lessons), using NASS-relevant examples. Date: The first session was held in February 2013. A second session was held April 2013, and a third session was held for state directors in the Northeast Regional Field Office in September 2013.	Teams with similar writing needs take the workshop in small group settings. NASS will continue to conduct sessions as opportunities allow.
Regular communication with staff through tip sheets, internal newsletter, and inserts in weekly leadership memo to field offices. Date: Periodic communication through various means	All staff
Plain writing guidance for outreach publications related to the Census of Agriculture. Throughout the year, statisticians who normally write only for technical audiences were involved in producing simpler documents (Highlights, infographics, PowerPoint presentations, articles, and other summaries) for more general audiences.	Headquarters and state staff.
In 2015, NASS plans to return to training teams in the principles of plain writing, and to expand many of the tools and opportunities used in Census of Agriculture dissemination to selected aspects of the survey program.	Headquarters and state staff.

Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)

Training/Date	Number of Employees Trained or Impacted
Updated NRCS Plain Writing Contacts to include a Plain Writing Web Coordinator, bringing the number of NRCS Plain Writing Coordinators to 4 – May 4, 2015	All agency employees (10,379)
Training, continuing dialogue, one-on-one information sharing and direction for Executive and Administrative Staff, Subject Matter Experts. Training to be conducted quarterly or more frequently if needed. NRCS had scheduled a training for no later than June 12, 2015.	Headquarters wide (approximately 400)

Renewing agency clearance process for documents to include more accountability for clarity of the documents. May 11, 2015	Headquarters wide (approximately 400)
NRCS Plain Writing Webinar, Business Grammar: How to Write Clearly and Concisely; Know Your Readers; Parts of Speech; Working with Words; Punctuation; Sentence Structure; Sentence Construction; Mechanics of Writing; Common Usage Errors; the Writing Process; How to Write Clearly, Effectively and Professionally; Editing and Proofreading Date: Completed in AgLearn as of May 7, 2015	All agency employees (some taking more than one course), conservation partners, partners and students (11,270)
Plain Writing resources and training made available to NRCS employees through the agency's Executive Correspondence Management Team. NRCS leadership provides employees with regular plain writing updates and direction to maintain plain writing as a priority with customer service and program implementation.	All agency employees (10,379)

National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA)

Training/Date	Employees Trained
In-house training for Web Development Team Unit Liaisons, new Communications Staff (CS) members, CS interns, and CS contractors Date: November 18, 2014	22

RMA (Risk Management Agency)

Training/Date	Employees Trained
Online Courses in AgLearn: • Introduction to Plain Language • Business Writing: Know Your Readers and Your Purpose • Business Writing: How to Write Clearly and Concisely	415 8 5

Rural Development (RD)

Training/Date	Employees Trained
Manager's Review/Training: March 4, 2015 Plain Language training focused on program descriptions and requirements to meet Plain Writing standards. AgLearn Plain Writing; On-Site RHS-Single Family Housing Plain Language Training RHS employees completed either the AgLearn Plain Language Course or the Single Family Housing On-Site Plain Language Course. Date: Jan/Feb/Mar/Apr	10

Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights (OASCR)

Training/Date	Employees Trained
In-house training	
PLAIN provided training – live Date: March 2013 to present	21
Online training – AgLearn Date: Ongoing	46 users through AgLearn. OASCR continues to encourages employees to complete writing training via AgLearn.

Office of Budget and Program Analysis (OBPA)

Training/Date	Employees Trained
In house (agency Staff or contractor)	
PLAIN provided training – live	
Webinars	
Online training Date: September 2011 to Present	10 users through AgLearn

Office of Communications (OC)

Training/Date	Employees Trained
In 2014, the Director of OC sent a message encouraging all employees to take advantage of the online "Introduction to Plain Language" course in AgLearn. OC has pushed the course to everyone's To Do list in AgLearn to highlight this training and make it easily accessible.	In the past year, nine OC employees have completed the course. OC will continue to emphasize the importance of this training for all employees.

Office of the Chief Economist (OCE)

Training/Date	Employees Trained
Agency provided the following trainings: Staff was asked to take optional AgLearn course: Introduction to Plain Writing Act	6

Office of the Chief Information Officer (OCIO)

Training/Date	Employees Trained
In-house Plain Writing training is provided as a component of OCIO's Professional Development Series, including a course entitled "Use of Plain Writing: Active vs. Passive Voice." New OCIO employees are encouraged to complete this course during their initial orientation phase, and to apply the Plain Writing principles and practices in all correspondence they develop or review. Date: March 2014. This training was offered on a recurring basis, as a refresher for current staff and as part of the orientation process for new OCIO employees. OCIO has also recommended that all employees assigned to each of the eight (8) Offices consider adding at least one Plain Writing course to their IDPs, to be selected from the following list: • Introduction to the Plain Writing Act • Introduction to Plain Writing • Business Writing: Know Your Readers and	

Your Purpose • Business Writing: How to Write Clearly and Concisely	25

Office of the Executive Secretariat (OES)

Training/Date	Employees Trained
Online training – AgLearn Date: Ongoing.	Training will be made available to all OES staff annually.
Best Practice: Plain Writing and the Plain Language Report Card session of the March meeting of the Council of Federal Executive Secretariats.	2 Slides from presentation were later distributed to additional staff.

Office of the General Counsel (OGC)

Training/Date	Employees Trained
OGC attorneys enrolled in 100 courses in Legal Writing and Research, in the West Legal Ed Center. The West Legal Ed Center has 150 courses available on this subject.	
OGC support staff took courses on "Effective Writing" courses offered during fiscal year 2014.	31

Office of the Inspector General (OIG)

Training/Date	Employees Trained
OIG presents training on writing in accordance with the Plain Writing Act, both within the agency and to the entire Inspector General community. OIG's training sessions on report writing are presented routinely to new auditors through the Council of the Inspectors General on Integrity and Efficiency. Training sessions took place in January and April of 2015. OIG had planned to conduct training on the requirements of the Plain Writing Act at OIG's Professional Development Conference. OIG has scheduled another training session for September 2015.	400

5. Ensuring Compliance

INTRODUCTION

Various processes are used across USDA in order to ensure compliance with the requirements of the Plain Writing Act.

SPOTLIGHT: APHIS IMPROVES CLARITY OF FEDERAL ORDERS

As part of its mission to safeguard American agriculture and natural resources, the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) issues Federal Orders that outline the rules and regulations for the handling and movement of plants and plant products. Every year, APHIS issues 50 to 60 of these orders to as many as 41,000 subscribers via its notification database. States, territories, and industry are obligated to adhere to the requirements of these orders, so the orders must be as clear and unambiguous as possible.

> **APHIS altered its workflow so that all Federal Orders now go through a plain language review in the deputy administrator's office before they go to the Office of General Counsel for legal clearance and eventual issuance to the public.**

To improve compliance with the Plain Writing Act of 2010, APHIS reviewed its process to write and approve Federal Orders. APHIS found that its orders had become burdened with thick, specialized language that had accumulated through the years. For example, many orders started with an unwieldy 90-word boilerplate sentence of legalese. APHIS broke that boilerplate into three 30-word sentences that now clearly state the legal authority of the orders. APHIS also started including a purpose statement at the beginning of the orders—information that used to be buried several paragraphs into the document. In addition, APHIS altered its workflow so that all Federal Orders now go through a plain language review in the deputy administrator's office before they go to the Office of General Counsel for legal clearance and eventual issuance to the public. Finally, APHIS is improving the readability and information design of its Federal Orders by using fewer formatting distractions such as heavy use of bold fonts.

COMPLIANCE EFFORTS (BY AGENCY)

The following list summarizes many of the agency-specific processes:

Food and Nutrition Service (FNS)/Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion (CNPP)

- FNS will continue to use a tipsheet and Web-based resources to promote the use of plain language during the drafting and clearance process for covered documents.
- The agency has distributed, and will continue to encourage supervisors whose staff may have difficulty with writing plainly to use, the online training modules that are available to USDA employees, perhaps by including them in individual development plans, as appropriate.

Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS)

- AMS-National Organic Program has implemented a formal internal review process that includes peer review; subject matter expert review; manager review; and a review by our in-house communications specialist, who is an expert in Plain Language. All materials go through a communications specialist prior to posting.

- AMS' Transportation and Marketing Program has a formal internal review process that includes peer review and supervisor review within USDA and with subject matter specialists. A writer-editor (who is an expert in Plain Language) and Web Design Specialist (who is expert in formatting documents for maximum online readability and impact) review periodicals. Reports go through the Associate Deputy Administrator, who has 20 years' experience in writing for nontechnical audiences and has edited journals and newsletters. Reports are reviewed by subject experts in academics and industry as needed. All materials go through a communications specialist prior to posting.

- The AMS Public Affairs Office has included in its strategic plan a goal to initiate a comprehensive content and language review of all agency materials including the AMS Web site. This review will enable AMS to develop, coordinate, and assist in the development of resources and activities that clearly communicate agency programs and services to target audiences. To meet this goal, AMS intends to tailor our messaging through the use of plain language.

- Currently, the agency is establishing a comprehensive library of all AMS products and messaging. AMS Public Affairs is creating updated agency templates for priority products and materials to ensure all materials meet plain language requirements.

Agricultural Research Service (ARS)/National Agricultural Library (NAL)

- ARS will continue to write publications and other documents and materials in plain language for its general, non-technical audiences. ARS' Information Staff and others have been trained in incorporating this element into their work, and they work with ARS employees to ensure written products are understandable by appropriate target audiences. The ARS Information Staff is responsible for reviewing and providing communications guidance on many of the non-technical publications, materials and information products designed for general public distribution and use.

- The National Agricultural Library has a Content Review Committee that reviews all new print and Web publications for compliance with NAL guidelines, including plain language. Individual teams are also responsible for implementing plain language on content that is being revised as a result of its recent content audit.

Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS)

APHIS has a staff of expert writers and editors who craft most of the key documents presented to the public, and a review system to ensure documents are plainly written. Additionally, the Administrator's office reviews the majority of correspondence for clarity. Each program unit has staff members trained in plain language, and the agency emphasizes the need for clear, direct, and straightforward communications with APHIS' stakeholders.

Economic Research Service (ERS)

Agency and Department editors will continue to review every manuscript and other documents. Plain writing training is included in presentation, media, and writing training for all employees.

Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS)

- FSIS' Office of Investigation, Enforcement, and Audit (OIEA) has a plain language component in the Communications performance element. OIEA's employees may have plain language training as one of the measures to submit to supervisors in consideration for earning a rating of "Fully Successful." Supervisors have encouraged employees to attend plain writing training, as needed. OIEA has encouraged the use of a guidance chart to remind and assist employees to apply plain language concepts in their written and oral communications. The guidance covers six areas: audience identification, document purpose, document organization, word choice, sentence structure, and paragraph composition.
- Since 1985, the Food Safety Education Staff (FSES) has provided food safety educational products written in language that is clear for consumers to understand. FSES' end goal, then and now, is to produce materials that are free of organizational jargon, government speak, and technical prattle, so the consumer is able to obtain the information presented.
- FSES creates food safety factsheets, publications, magnets, flyers, posters, videos, and American Sign Language videos in plain, age-appropriate, and nationality-specific language to meet the needs of its many constituents. It also produces products for the hearing impaired and visually impaired and for those who read below the national reading level of 6th grade.

Foreign Agricultural Service (FAS)

FAS has upgraded systems in place to ensure that publicly available materials are accurately and plainly written. The FAS Public Affairs Office serves a primary role in reviewing and editing documents for the agency Web site. For instance, this step ensures that economic analyses can be comprehended by non-economists and the general public. The agency launched several efforts this year to train new and junior employees on drafting briefing papers, official correspondence, and other written materials. This training and orientation included an emphasis on clear, easy-to-understand writing.

Forest Service

- The Forest Service has review systems in place to ensure that its documents are plainly written. For example, all publications by the Forest Service's Washington Office are reviewed by the Forest Service Office of Communication, followed by another review by the USDA Office of Communications. Both offices have professional writer/editors who oversee the reviews, ensuring that Forest Service documents are understandable and usable by the intended readers.
- In 2011, the Office of Communications in the Washington Office began upgrading the agency's Web site to meet the needs of users, partly by ensuring that Web content is in plain language. The first phase of the redesign was launched in 2013. The Office of Communications completed the redesign in 2014.
- In addition, individual staffs at the national level have their own controls for plain writing.

o The Policy Analysis staff in the Washington Office has a professional writer/editor who reviews every Policy Analysis report before it is released to readers, for style, logic, accuracy, and plain writing. The staff writes reports and other documents for top leaders in the Washington Office and wants to be sure that the writing is plain and easy to read.

o In 2012, the Office of Regulatory and Management Services in the Washington Office revised its review systems to ensure plain writing.

▪ Before issuing new directives and regulations, the Directives and Regulations team works with program managers to ensure that the writing is clear, concise, simple, and easy to understand by all readers.

▪ The Controlled Correspondence team has professional writer/editors who work with program staff to ensure that letters in reply to public inquiries are short, to the point, and clearly written.

▪ The Freedom of Information Act team is required to use technical and legal language in responding to requests for information; but, following that language, the Forest Service inserts a plain language sentence that explains clearly and concisely the types of records being released and the types of information or records being withheld.

o In December 2012, the Forest Service's Human Resources Management (HRM) staff reviewed its system for ensuring compliance with the Plain Writing Act. The staff now has the following system in place:

▪ A panel of at least five employees reviews Forest Service-wide email messages for compliance with the Plain Writing Act.

▪ A panel of at least seven employees reviews responses to congressional inquiries.

▪ A panel of at least three employees reviews HRM-wide email messages.

▪ Public affairs staff reviews content in email, briefing papers, Web sites, and newsletters.

▪ Public affairs staff creates and publishes accessible information in conformance with Section 508.

o The Albuquerque Service Center's Budget and Finance office recently filled a writer-editor position to help create and distribute correspondence and documentation written in plain language. The Chief Financial Officer is fully engaged in editing all documents for plain language.

o In the Washington Office, the Forest Health Protection program established an internal review system for documents and an internal/external peer-review system for reports, partly to review them for plain writing.

o The International Programs staff in the Washington Office has taken steps to conform to the Plain Writing Act.

▪ The staff implemented a new method of eliciting and reviewing more than 50 program fact sheets posted online to ensure consistency and accuracy.

▪ All correspondence, all Web site materials, and most other documents are reviewed by the Director or by trained staff, for plain language.

o The Fire and Aviation Management staff in the Washington Office has public affairs specialists who work closely with technical staff to ensure that all documents conform to the Plain Writing Act.

▪ Public affairs specialists work closely with technical staff to develop communication plans (including statements, key messages, and questions and answers) to help staff

respond in plain language to inquiries about technical topics from the public, news media, elected officials, and other interested parties. For instance, communication plans have been developed on next generation airtankers, unmanned aerial systems, and fire retardant.

- Staff responds accordingly in plain language, to inquiries from news media, elected officials, and other interested parties about a range of topics, such as airtankers, firefighter fatalities, and the use of fire retardant.
- In 2013, staff began revising the Forest Service's wildfire-related Web site to better communicate with the general public. The new Web page includes clear, non-technical language, as well as compelling photos and graphics to better communicate the challenges associated with wildland fire management in an era of longer and more severe wildfire seasons.

- Forest Service regional offices and research stations typically have similar review systems in place, as do many individual forests and staffs.
  - In the Pacific Southwest Region (California and the Pacific Islands), units have identified document reviewers who review all covered documents to ensure that they are plainly written.
    - Regional public affairs staff working with the Regional Forest Planning Team reviews documents for distribution to the public, both in print and online, for compliance with the Plain Writing Act.
    - Forest-level public affairs and planning staffs review media releases, articles, brochures, flyers, interpretive information, briefing papers, or testimonies for compliance with the Plain Writing Act.
    - Forest-level planners review and edit scoping documents and all major planning documents for NEPA compliance and readability. NEPA documents are regularly reviewed for plain writing and ease of reading.
    - The Cleveland National Forest's Palomar Ranger District established a quality control system to ensure that all correspondence, signage, Web changes, and new releases are reviewed and approved by the district ranger for plain language. Staff officers trained in plain writing review information for external distribution before approval by the district ranger. The public affairs officer review social media postings, Web postings, and press releases to ensure that documents and posts are plainly written.
  - In the Northern Region (Montana, northern Idaho, and the Dakotas), the Regional Forester and line officers have emphasized meeting the requirements of the Plain Writing Act in all internal and external documents. Professional writer/editors review documents for plain language, scrutinizing the language and intent based upon intended audience and kind of information;materials posted on the regional Web site are reviewed in the same say. In March 2013, the Region began measuring the accessibility of posted materials through a public survey. On a scale of 1 to 10, the regional Web pages scored 7.8 in terms of "readability," 7.9 in terms of "accuracy of information," and 8.0 in terms of "ability to load pages without getting an error message."
  - In the Eastern Region (the Northeast and Upper Midwest):
    - The Public and Government Relations staff in the regional office does an editorial review of all responses to Department-level requests for briefings, responses to Congress by the Regional Forester, and regional Web site content.

- ▪ In 2013, in order to improve its Web site's readability, the Region reduced the number of authorized contributors. Regional staff also used Web analytics to redesign its Web site for compliance with the Plain Writing Act. The Public and Government Relations staff does quality control on all writing for the Region's public-facing Web site.
  - ▪ The Region uses Web analytics to identify areas of heavy public use. It uses the information to prioritize time and resources spent to redesign and revise Web site content in accordance with the Plain Writing Act.
- o The Forest Products Laboratory (responsible for Forest Service research and development of new forest products nationwide) has taken a number of steps to comply with the Plain Writing Act.
  - ▪ In 2013, the Lab created Lab Notes, a blog that translates the complex research and development done by Forest Service scientists into plain language that people can easily understand.
  - ▪ The Lab also tailored its Web site to the theme of "News You Can Use," explaining the benefits of Forest Service research to the taxpayer in plain terms (for example, What's the best way to stack firewood?).
  - ▪ Lab staff is dedicated to communicating on a level that is as inclusive as possible. Office of Communications staff edits all outreach documents for plain language to reach as wide a public as possible. It also tailors specific products to break complex information into easy-to-read small bites. The agency's TechLines and FinishLines are examples. See http://www.fpl.fs.fed.us/search/search_action.php?phrasesAndKeywords=techlines&searchmode=publications&sortgroup=year&pubyearstart=1914&pubyearend=2015; and http://www.fpl.fs.fed.us/search/search_action.php?phrasesAndKeywords=finishlines&searchmode=publications&sortgroup=significance&pubyearstart=1914&pubyearend=2015
- o All material published by the Pacific Northwest Research Station (responsible for Forest Service research in Alaska, Oregon, and Washington) goes through a rigorous quality-control process. The Station has two editors who edit all printed material and Web content published by the Station, for clarity and adherence to GPO style. A proofreader proofs each document to verify that all edits have been accurately made. The station's publication control officer reviews every document before it is sent to the printer or published online.
- o The Southern Research Station (responsible for Forest Service research across the South) conducts extensive editorial review of all research manuscripts for the intended audiences.
  - ▪ The Station has a full-time editor, a full-time writer/editor, and several contracted editors on staff. The staff ensures that the publications adhere to plain writing principles. Staff members provide feedback to employees and contractors through independent reviews of their editorial work. During the editorial review process, the reviewer routinely suggests changes to the tone and presentation of scientific information so that a more general audience can understand and use the information provided.
  - ▪ The Station's Technical Publications Team has a publishing process flow chart and manuscript approval sheet/process in place for publication submission and review. This process is used for both technical and non-technical publications.

- ▪ The Station publishes CompassLive, an online periodical that translates scientific manuscripts into concise, clearly understandable language, with links to additional information.
- ▪ The Station's marketing and mass/social media materials for its research products are simple, informative, and easy to understand.
- o The Northern Research Station (responsible for Forest Service research in the Northeast and Upper Midwest) has taken steps to comply with the Plain Writing Act.
    - ▪ In preparing the Station for its annual submission in response to the Research and Development Research Highlights data call, every submission by a researcher is edited for plain writing by the Station Communications and Science Delivery staff. For each of these 90+ highlights, a two-sentence summary and a full paragraph version are created. This material is frequently reused and reworked during the year for delivery, in response to other data calls.
    - ▪ Major new Northern Research Station Web content is reviewed by a Station Web Action Team before being launched on the public-facing Web site. The review ensures that content is clearly written and meets Forest Service standards.

- **Key public document development (ongoing):** For Forest Service budget justification overview (designed, in part, for the general public), the Chief's Office tasked a professional writer/editor with drafting the overview in accordance with plain writing principles.

- **Key public document review (ongoing):** For documents such as the Forest Service Strategic Plan and the annual Agency Financial Report, the Chief's Office tasks a professional writer/editor with reviewing and rewriting summary statements by the Chief in accordance with plain writing principles.

- **Key public document development (ongoing):** The Forest Service Chief is in a position to reach large and influential external audiences through speeches, appearing at dozens of public speaking events per year. To facilitate public access to speeches, a professional writer/editor drafts every major speech. The written speeches, edited for readability in accordance with the principles of plain writing, are posted on the Forest Service Web site.

- **Key operational document development (ongoing):** Every year, the Executive Leadership Team in the Washington Office travels to two or three Forest Service regional offices for a series of high-level meetings and strategic dialogues called Chief's Reviews. A professional writer/editor captures the proceedings in writing and condenses them into key messages, in accordance with the principles of plain writing. The Chief's Review reports are posted on the internal Forest Service Web site.

- **Key operational document review (ongoing):** Every 12 months, the Human Resources Management staff reviews the Human Resources Standard Operation Procedures for plain writing, among other things.

- **Key public document development (2014):** In the Pacific Southwest Region, a Public Affairs Specialist assigned to the Forest Plan Revision Staff specifically reviewed documents associated with forest plan revisions in the region (including environmental analyses, management plans, and decision documents) for the principles of plain writing.

- **Key public document development (2013):** Restoration of degraded forest and grassland ecosystems is one of the highest priorities for the Forest Service. To help communicate the need for ecological restoration, the Pacific Southwest Region has posted a series of 14 short videos on its Web site. The videos cover a range of restoration efforts, from aspen restoration, to chaparral restoration, to the Urban Releaf initiative in urban areas, to restoration efforts by the Veterans

Green Corps, to reforestation following the 1992 Cleveland Fire. The regional office reviews every episode for plain language.

- **Key public document development (2013):** In 2013, the Northern Research Station (responsible for Forest Service research in the Northeast and Upper Midwest) edited its submissions for the Forest Service's annual Research Highlights publication for plain language. The material is routinely used for briefing papers prepared for USDA and Congress. The Station deliberately chooses plain words and familiar slogans in describing the results of its scientific research.

- **Key operational document review (2013):** In implementing the Plain Writing Act, the Forest Health Protection program revised an internal form (FS-2100, Pesticide Use Proposal) to clarify intent.

- **Key operational document review (2013):** In 2013, the Eastern Region used the principles of plain writing in revising its processes for posting materials on its Web site. The revision supplements regulatory requirements in the Forest Service Manual.

- **Key operational document development (2013):** In 2013, the Eastern Region created external Web pages for hiring temporary employees and student interns, using the principles of plain writing to make its recruitment needs and efforts easier for people to find and understand. These parts of the Region's Web site are now among the most popular.

- **Key public/operational document review (2013):** In the Alaska Region, professional writer/editors reviewed a series of key documents for plain writing, including *Leaders' Intent: Recreation, Wilderness, and Heritage Program Management in the Alaska Region*; 10 formal letters from the Regional Forester; 25 Alaska Region roadmaps and Alaska Region niche documents; 62 briefing papers posted on the regional Web site; the quarterly USDA Newsletter; two reports on forest conditions (State of the Tongass and State of the Chugach); 40 news releases; and a briefing book for the Executive Leadership Team from the Washington Office for a Chief's Review.

- **Key public/operational document review (2013):** In the Northern Region, professional writer/editors reviewed internal materials for the regional office, Washington Office, and USDA; congressional correspondence and communications; "Hot Topic" papers and other briefing materials for internal and external audiences; materials posted on the regional Web sites; and media releases as well as responses to public inquiries about programs, projects, and issues.

Farm Service Agency

FSA reviewed and updated 2014 Farm Bill external communications to staff and customers. Efforts were undertaken to conform to plain language in 2014 Farm Bill documents, including fact sheets, notices, Web-based communications, and associated materials. Ongoing monitoring of these materials occurred to ensure that updated information is provided on a periodic and systematic basis. Careful attention was paid to avoid oversimplification of technical terms where such efforts may change the accuracy of the meaning of such terms or the interpretation of such terms by specialized audiences.

Grain Inspection, Packers, and Stockyards Administration (GIPSA)

Before publication of new or revised Packers and Stockyards Program brochures, the Litigation and Economic Analysis Division (LEAD) analyzes the text using readability statistics available in

Microsoft Word. The analysis helps identify writing that is not plain and easy to read. To improve these statistics, writers must use short sentences and active voice, limit the use of legal terms, and incorporate lists and tables to present the information. LEAD analyzed the text of the Packers and Stockyards Program's draft 2014 Annual Report in a similar manner to improve its readability.

National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS)

- NASS named an employee for compliance issues.
- Since 2012, NASS has pursued a variety of formal and informal channels to train staff in plain, clear writing. These include a 2-hour workshop focused on NASS examples and writing needs, promotion of the AgLearn courses, and a variety of refresher materials such as tip sheets, an internal newsletter, and inserts in leadership memos to field offices.
- In 2013, NASS created plain writing guidance for producing a variety of general-audience materials about the 2012 Census of Agriculture, and for the last year, statisticians from across the agency have been involved in producing such materials. The audience was not just experienced data users and agriculture media but also state and Federal government policymakers, association leaders, farmers, researchers, and students.
- In 2015, with the intensive census year completed, NASS wants to bring some of those same general-audience tools and products to the agency's ongoing survey reports, expanding their reach and accessibility.

Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)

- NRCS designated a national plain writing team including a coordinator for plain writing on the Web.
- Plain writing resources and training are available through the Public Affairs Division's Executive Correspondence Management Team and USDA's AgLearn online training site.
- Leadership is committed to continual plain writing process improvements using two-way sharing of information, data, and success stories, as well as maintaining a dialogue regarding the importance of plain writing, with all agency employees.
- The agency maintains focus on the importance of writing in plain language and monitors Plain Writing Act compliance through review of articles, surveys, correspondence, and executive documents; training; and one-on-one interaction with writers.
- NRCS provides consistent review and approval of all public communications for accuracy, timeliness, usability, and plain writing.

Rural Development (RD)

- Rural Development (RD) Managers and staff were reminded of the importance of using plain language for all communications and work to ensure that prepared documents strive to meet these requirements.
- RHS has a display located in the reception area of the office, for staff and visitors to view, reinforcing the importance of plain writing and effective communications.

- Web site program descriptions are periodically reviewed by the Web site governance team to ensure compliance and consistency of question-and-answer format.

Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights (OASCR)

- OASCR assigned an employee to serve as the agency contact for compliance issues, including compliance with the Plain Writing Act.
- All documents are cleared through the Public Information Officer for OASCR.
- OASCR has a formal internal review process that includes peer review, subject matter expert review, manager review, and a review by the agency's in-house communications specialist. In addition, all materials are reviewed by OASCR's Plain Writing Official and Coordinator prior to dissemination.

Office of Communications (OC)

- One of OC's 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 ability and experience. Because this staff reviews the materials prepared by agency writers, professionalism and adherence to plain writing are built into the process.
- OC writer/editors review and clear all publications released to the public for clarity, appropriateness, quality, and compliance with Federal publishing policies. OC coordinators review publications for accuracy and consistency with departmental programs and policies.
- OC coordinators (and sometimes speechwriters) review press releases for clear delivery of messages to intended audiences.
- OC speechwriters are also hired based on experience and ability. Because USDA speeches often break down highly technical subjects for non-technical audiences, compliance with plain writing is inherent to the process. Speeches and speech transcripts are often posted to the Web.

Office of the Chief Information Officer (OCIO)

- OCIO distributed plain writing materials and checklists to staff, and will continue to encourage supervisors whose staff may have difficulty with writing plainly and concisely to use the online training modules that are available in AgLearn. Employees and supervisors are also encouraged to include plain writing training in their IDPs, as appropriate. OCIO leadership is committed to continuous process improvements using two-way sharing of information, data, and newsletters, as well as maintaining dialogue regarding the importance of the Plain Writing Act for employees OCIO-wide.
- In late 2012, OCIO staff began upgrading the offices' Web site to better meet the needs of users, partly by ensuring that Web content is written in plain language. The first phase of the Web redesign was launched in 2013, and full implementation was accomplished in 2014.

Office of the Executive Secretariat (OES)

OES coordinates the compilation of agency submissions for USDA's annual Plain Writing Act Compliance Report. OES edits the report and submits it to USDA's senior official for plain writing.

Office of the General Counsel (OGC)

One of OGC's functions is to review, edit, and clear executive correspondence and other material prepared by USDA agencies.

Office of the Inspector General (OIG)

Improving the clarity of OIG's writing is fundamental to the review process that all of OIG's documents undergo, from inception to publication. Each reviewer who reads documents comments on how readable they are for the general public, and those comments are integrated into the text.

6. USDA Plain Writing Web Sites

USDA AGENCIES' WEB SITES RELATED TO THE PLAIN WRITING ACT

The following provides information on plain writing Web sites that various USDA agencies have launched.

Agricultural Research Service (ARS) and National Agricultural Library (NAL)

- ARS launched its new online science magazine, AgResearch (www.agresearchmag.ars.usda.gov), in April 2015. The magazine features stories on scientific research discoveries occurring at ARS research laboratories across the Nation and abroad. The magazine offers consumers a way to access ARS scientific information in a way that is easy to use, easy to understand, and provides an informative, engaging, and enhanced digital experience. Stories are short (average 500 words) and incorporate key findings to help readers learn more easily about, and gain a practical understanding of, ARS research.
- NAL launched a new core site in March 2014. The site content was written in accordance with plain writing principles. This new site also links to USDA's Plain Language information. NAL is in the process of working with its Information Centers to redesign their sites, with an emphasis on plain language and writing for the Web.

Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS)

APHIS has an Intranet site and a Sharepoint® site (both for internal agency use) that have plain language resources for employees, including links, courses, checklists, and templates. This agency has also developed a "Virtual Writing Center" and has organized resources by problem area, such as excessive acronyms, active/passive voice, etc.

Economic Research Service (ERS)

Content of the ERS Web site (www.ers.usda.gov) goes through ERS' professional editors before it is posted, and the agency has guidelines for Web writing.

Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS)

Since early 2012, FSIS has had an internal plain language, plain writing folder on the Office of Policy and Program Development (OPPD) SharePoint site. In 2014, OPPD added a template for Compliance Guideline development that includes plain language writing tips.

Foreign Agricultural Service (FAS)

FAS/Public Affairs Office maintains a link on FAS' public Web site to the USDA plain language site, which includes the updated Plain Writing Training course.

Forest Service (FS)

- For the general public, the Forest Service relies on USDA's Plain Writing Web site.

- The Forest Service has developed an Intranet Web page to help employees understand the need for plain writing and to provide tools for improving their writing skills. The Web page has links to the kinds of Forest Service documents and other materials that are covered by the Plain Writing Act. The page also has links to public-facing plain writing Web sites, a checklist for writers, and a list of 13 writing-related AgLearn training modules, along with brief descriptions.

- The Pacific Northwest Research Station and other field units have links on their internal Web sites to the Forest Service and USDA Web pages on the Plain Writing Act.

- In the Rocky Mountain Region, at least two forests have Web materials related to the Plain Writing Act.

- The Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre, and Gunnison National Forests have guides posted on the Intranet site to aid employees in writing clearly, speaking plainly, and developing communications that are targeted to the intended audiences. The Forest Service has also posted a list of AgLearn courses to help employees find training opportunities related to the Plain Writing Act.

- The Arapaho and Roosevelt National Forests and Pawnee National Grassland have links to plain language information on their Intranet site.

- In the Pacific Southwest Region, the Regional Office maintains Intranet Web site links to the Washington Office Intranet Web page to help employees understand the need for plain writing and to provide tools for improving their writing skills.

- The Southern Region has posted plain-language-compliant guidelines for writing for the Web, including making Web content scannable; using meaningful headings and subheadings; writing concisely for users who scan rather than read word for word; using the inverted pyramid style of writing; breaking up Web content into easy-to-read "chunks"; and using an informal conversational style, including second person.

- The Forest Products Laboratory uses its public-facing Web site to exemplify plain language in accordance with the Plain Writing Act, for example, in such go-to destinations as Lab Notes.

- The Southern Research Station has posted a link to the Plain Language site.

National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS)

- NASS has an internal Web site with plain writing resources, including agency-produced material and links to USDA, Plain, and other Web sites.

- For the general public, NASS relies on USDA's Plain Writing Web site to convey plain writing priorities and principles.

- In 2012, NASS revamped the Census of Agriculture section of its Web site to create a user-friendly, interactive site at which farmers expected to respond to the Census could come for information. In 2013, NASS further developed the site to be an accessible source of information on Census results.

- In 2015, NASS has undertaken a usability study of the entire agency Web site in preparation for a redesign. The Census of Agriculture site was made more accessible, and, NASS wants to modernize the agency Web site to more effectively meet user needs.

Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)

NRCS' National and state Web sites are written in conformance with plain writing principles. A designated Web plain writing coordinator reviews content to ensure that posted text is written in plain language. In addition NRCS has information on plain writing in its correspondence manual.

Rural Development (RD)

Rural Development has incorporated new Web site features that show written program descriptions in plain language format. These program descriptions are now in "question and answer" format and are consistent with assurance that customers can easily determine if they are eligible to apply for a program and how.

Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights (OASCR)

- OASCR's Web site is at http://www.ascr.usda.gov/.
- Documents covered by the Act—all documents issued by the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights.
- Links to OMB and PLAIN on Web page

Office of Communication (OC)

OC maintains the Department's centralized Plain Writing Web page at http://usda.gov/wps/portal/usda/usdahome?navid=PLAIN_WRITING

Office of the Chief Information Officer (OCIO)

The full suite of OCIO's comprehensive plain writing resources can be accessed by clicking the following link:
http://www.usda.gov/wps/portal/usda/usdahome?navid=PLAIN_WRITING

Office of the Executive Secretariat (OES)

OES is scheduled to provide reference links to the USDA Plain Language Report as well as the Center for Plain Language Web site on OES' Web site.

Office of the General Counsel

There is a Plain Writing link on OGC's internal Web site.

Office of Inspector General (OIG)

OIG has included, on its public-facing Web site, a statement describing its commitment to the goals of the Plain Writing Act. This statement includes links to Department resources, as well as other material.

7. Customer Satisfaction

INTRODUCTION

Customer satisfaction is the true measure of how well we are achieving compliance with the Plain Writing Act—both the letter of the law and its intent.

HOW WE SOLICIT COMMENTS AND WHAT PEOPLE ARE SAYING

Obtaining direct feedback from the public and our stakeholders on how to improve our implementation of the Plain Writing Act and how to identify those documents that require plain writing improvements is a top priority for USDA. One way we do this is to invite the public to comment in the "How You Can Help" section of our plain writing Web page.

The following list highlights some of the ways USDA agencies are receiving feedback about their writing. Some agencies are also receiving comments about how Plain Writing training has improved the way USDA communicates with its customers.

Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS)

- The "Ask the Expert" Web-based interface allows users to rate the usefulness of responses they receive from APHIS. The agency uses comments received through "Ask the Expert" to improve its answers to questions.
- APHIS has received positive feedback from the public on its redesigned Web site.

Economic Research Service (ERS)

The ERS Web site receives nearly a million visitors every year; two-thirds of those visitors are repeat visitors. ERS receives consistently high marks in the ASCI surveys.

Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS)

- The USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline (Hotline) converses with personnel from FSIS District Offices and consumers on a daily basis about the Food Safety Education Staff's (FSES) educational products. The Hotline has never received negative feedback from any individual or group of people regarding the products FSES produces.
- State Meat and Poultry Inspection programs staff changed how they explained concepts, decreasing questions from the programs and allowing those making inquiries to receive their responses more quickly receiving. Other areas have also reported a decrease in the number of follow-ups and clarifications to items revised to use plain language. This information is anecdotal; no specific measures are yet in place.

Foreign Agricultural Service (FAS)

The Public Affairs Office routinely monitors the comments provided by the public through the "Contact Us" tab/link on the FAS Web site and any emails directed to the staff concerning the information available on the FAS Web site. To date, FAS/Public Affairs has not received any complaints concerning difficult interpretation of information.

Forest Service (FS)

- In March 2013, the Chief's Office launched an effort to solicit public feedback on the clarity of Forest Service documents and other written materials by adding to the standard nondiscrimination statement in all publications. The Forest Service proposed that USDA identify an appropriate office for responding to comments on agency writing and add the following statement to its standard disclaimer: "In accordance with the Plain Writing Act of 2010, USDA is committed to writing forms, letters, brochures, Web sites, and other materials in a way that the public can clearly understand. We appreciate your feedback. To comment on USDA written materials, write to USDA, … or call …"

- Forest Service regions typically invite the public to comment on all aspects of Forest Service activities online, including the quality of its written and online materials. The Pacific Southwest Region, for example, solicits public input at http://www.fs.usda.gov/contactus/r5/about-region/contactus.

- Indirect measures abound of customer satisfaction with Forest Service materials prepared in accordance with requirements under the Plain Writing Act.
  - The Alaska Region got public compliments from the Forest Service's Executive Leadership Team on the briefing book it prepared for the Chief's Review in August 2013. Forty of the Region's news releases led to stories in the media, and the Region has received favorable emails and personal comments in response to its 62 briefing papers on the regional Web site and its USDA newsletter.
  - In 2013, the Eastern Region (the Northeast and Upper Midwest) adopted SharePoint for internal communications and has received excellent employee feedback. In 2014, the Region implemented a paperless review process for Human Resources packages using SharePoint that reduced redundancies in how hiring packages are written and presented to decisionmakers. Moreover, increased visitor traffic on parts of the Web site that the Region redesigned indicates that the public is seeking the new information provided.
  - The Pacific Northwest Research Station (responsible for Forest Service research in Alaska, Oregon, and Washington) solicits public feedback on publications developed for general audiences. Forest Service scientists consider them useful tools for communicating their research findings, and readers write to tell the agency that they appreciate the accessible format and usefulness of the information.
  - In 2013, the Pacific Northwest Research Station's *Science Findings* publication—written to communicate new research to land managers and decisionmakers—received an "Award of Excellence" from the National Association of Government Communicators.
  - In 2013, the Forest Products Laboratory launched a public-facing blog called Lab Notes. Average visitation has risen from 25-50 visits per day to hundreds, partly due to the user-friendly writing style in conformance with the Plain Writing Act.

Grain Inspection, Packers, and Stockyards Administration (GIPSA)

- The Packers and Stockyards Program established an internal Change Control Working Group (CCWG) in 2009. Based on more than 200 employee suggestions, this group has recommended creating, changing and clarifying documents—which were subsequently created or revised—based on customer questions and industry trends. Documents that have been revised or clarified include regulations, Work Instructions, subprocess modules used to perform regulatory reviews, subpoena templates, and forms used by regulated entities (such as Annual Reports) to comply with the Packers and Stockyards Program. The CCWG is presently working on the creation of a new Bond pamphlet to provide more clarity for registrants and packers who are required to obtain bonds under the Packers and Stockyards Act. If approved, the new Bond pamphlet will be available on the agency's Web site and in print. In conjunction with its work on the pamphlet, the CCWG recently approved suggested changes to the Program's bonding forms. The changes simplified the bond and bond equivalent form by removing a somewhat confusing requirement to delete non-applicable condition clauses and replacing it with the requirement to have the customer simply check a box for the applicable condition clause(s). The changes have been implemented.
- In 2000, GIPSA's Federal Grain Inspection Service (FGIS) was approved by the Office of Management and Budget to issue a voluntary customer survey concerning the delivery of official inspection, grading, and weighing services authorized under the United States Grain Standards Act and the Agricultural Marketing Act of 1946. Until 2013, the survey was conducted by postcard via U.S. mail. In the summer of 2013, however, the survey was posted to GIPSA's Web site and is now conducted totally electronically through the use of Survey Monkey. This voluntary survey gives customers that are primarily in the grain, oilseed, rice, lentil, dry pea, edible bean, and related agricultural commodity markets an opportunity to provide feedback on the quality of services they receive and provides GIPSA with information on new services that customers wish to receive. Customer feedback assists FGIS with enhancing the value of services and service delivery provided by the official inspection, grading, and weighing system.

National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS)

- NASS has rewritten some Web pages with a specific emphasis on writing the content and links in plain language. In 2015, NASS began a significant effort to restructure its agency Web site to make all content more directly relevant to users and the language simpler and more direct. As in initial step toward that end, NASS is conducting a usability study to determine what users like and do not like about the Web interactions with NASS. The agency expected to have the results from that study in late spring/early summer.
- The year-long emphasis on direct, plain communication with all U.S. farmers and ranchers on the importance of the Census of Agriculture to their operations and to agencies and institutions that make decisions affecting them helped NASS achieve its target 80-percent response rate despite reductions in the agency budget (including fewer resources for follow up) and internal reorganizations.
- At the end of the Census of Agriculture data collection period in mid 2013, NASS conducted an evaluation of its Census communications materials and messaging. External respondents included farm organizations, state departments of agriculture, commodity groups, and community-based

organizations. In response to questions, 81 percent said they used the provided materials to promote the census, and 71 percent said they found the materials easier to understand than in previous censuses and surveys.   Individual items were rated very or somewhat useful by even larger percentages, including, as follows: frequently asked questions or FAQs (94 percent) the Census Web site (http://www.agcensus.usda.gov/index.php) (88 percent), USDA news releases (88 percent), and news release templates for states to use (87 percent).

- Another aspect of NASS' Census messaging in which plain writing made a difference is in its communications about the option to respond to the Census online. The first Census of Agriculture was conducted in 1840, and for more than 165 years, farmers and ranchers responded by mail, in-person, or telephone interviews. In 2007, they had the option to fill out the Census form online for the first time. In that year, 4 percent of respondents used the online option. For the 2012 Census, NASS focused more strongly on promoting the online response option, conveying that it is convenient, secure, and saves time and taxpayer dollars. In addition, the agency rewrote the instructions for how respond online to make them simpler and more user friendly. In the 2012 Census, 13.3 percent of respondents used the online option—more than triple the share that did so in 2007. (See a write-up in the USDA blog series, Then and Now at http://blogs.usda.gov/2014/02/06/usda-then-and-now-aginnovates/.

- In planning the 2014 release of the data (preliminary release in February 2014 and final release beginning May 2014 and ongoing throughout the year with various products), NASS focused on providing a range of audience-appropriate materials that are written in a plain, clear style. NASS is currently in the middle of a usability survey to get feedback on its regular and Census Web sites in preparation for undertaking a major reorganization of the agency Web site. The results of the usability study will inform how the agency structures the content, organizes the navigation, and describes programs.

Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)

NRCS uses ForeSee survey software to determine customer satisfaction and Web site usability. This software enables NRCS to receive direct customer feedback regarding its programs. NRCS also receives customer feedback via training, meetings, and dialogue.

Rural Development (RD)

Rural Housing Service:
- The Centralized Servicing Center (CSC) in St. Louis, Missouri, surveyed Rural Development (RD), Single Family Housing Direct program borrowers (hereafter referred to as customers) in 2004, 2006, 2008, and 2012. The questionnaire was developed with input from partners in the field offices and other RD organizations.
- The purpose of the survey is to measure the movement of overall customer satisfaction, as well as identify areas that require focused attention for improvement. The measurement of these components must be achieved using a consistent, reliable method that reveals action items that can be initiated to increase overall satisfaction.
- 6,000 customers were randomly surveyed in 2012, containing 7%-Spanish speaking preference customers, and 10.9% customers identified as living in a persistent-poverty area, which reflects

the demographics of the portfolio. The response rate was exceptional, with 2,954 respondents or 49.2%, which is consistent with past surveys.

- Sections of the survey were measured either by a level of satisfaction or level of agreement using a 1 to 7 rating scale. The scale was then converted to equate to a 100% scale.
- By over a 3-to-1 margin, customers were highly satisfied with the ongoing servicing of their RD loan by CSC. These scores have remained statistically stable since the 2008 survey.
- Regarding standard written customer communications, a large percentage of customers agreed that the communications they receive from CSC are clearly explained, easy to understand and contain all the information needed. Specifically on average, the following was found:
   - Monthly Billing Statement:
     91.7% found it easy to understand
     92.4% found it had all the information needed
     86% found payment changes are clearly explained
   - Escrow Statement: 88.4% are satisfied with information received
   - Payment Assistance Process:
     86.3% found it easy to understand
     85.1% found changes were clearly communicated

Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights (OASCR)

- For employees responsible for writing documents, a performance element is included in their performance plan for rating.
- Direct customer feedback is positive.

Office of Communications (OC)

- In collaboration with the USDA Open Data Working Group, USDA is pursuing technologies to support the implementation of robust feedback mechanisms through USDA.gov.
- USDA currently supports feedback through various methods that include the following:
   - Comments and feedback through OC's USDA Blog WordPress platform;
   - Social media networks;
   - Ideation tools (ideation is a tech term for a platform used to generate ideas);
   - Feedback through OC's AskTheExpert knowledgebase, and through the agency's Contact Us page, which houses an Information hotline and organization directories.
   - Many USDA agency Web sites leverage the ForeSee platform, as well.
- Throughout FY15 and FY16, USDA plans to evaluate and implement new feedback mechanisms through its Open Data Policy Working group. USDA maintains numerous Web sites or platforms where the public can engage now in existing participatory processes of USDA.
- Data from "Analytics, usa.gov" shows that the USDA Web site, USDA.gov, is one of the top 20 most active Federal Web sites in the government. This means that, at any given time, there are more people online at USDA.gov that on the vast majority of Federal Web sites. This strongly reflects a positive user experience, thanks to the OC Digital team and the design of engaging content.

Office of the Chief Information Officer (OCIO)

As a component of its Professional Development Series, the OCIO Plain Language Coordinators developed and presented a course on active vs. passive writing, to assist staff in recognizing problematic writing habits, as well as effective ways to improve their communication with interested parties. This course was initially presented in March 2013, and was updated and made available to OCIO staff on a continual basis in FY 2014. The course was very well received as indicated by the positive feedback contained in the employee course evaluations.

Office of the General Counsel (OGC)

OGC will conduct evaluations as more of its staff members are trained.

Office of Inspector General (OIG)

OIG's public-facing Web site (http://www.usda.gov/oig/) includes all of OIG's published products as well as information on how to contact the agency regarding its writing. OIG also operates a hotline number that the public can use to directly contact the agency.

8. Agency Coordinators

INTRODUCTION

As noted in Section I, USDA created a working group of agency officials who lead the Department's implementation of the Plain Writing Act and ensure the Department complies with the Act. The following officials, listed in the order shown in the table below, ensure that their agency or office produces public documents in plain language.

Agency/Office	Senior Agency Official Responsible for Plain Writing	Plain Writing Coordinator(s)
Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS)	Karen T. Comfort	Dana Stewart
Agricultural Research Service (ARS) **National Agricultural Library (NAL)**	Tara Weaver-Missick (for ARS and NAL)	Tara Weaver-Missick (ARS) Mina Chung (ARS) Kim Kaplan (ARS) Melanie Gardner (NAL only)
Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS)	Beth Gaston	Jason Hancock
Economic Research Service (ERS)	John Weber Dale Simms	Adrie Custer
Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) **Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion (CNPP)**	Rich Lucas Rich Lucas	Rich Lucas Rich Lucas
Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS)	Chuck Williams Greg DiNapoli	Vince Fayne, Jacquelyn Jones,Greg DiNapoli, Laura Reiser, Joe Abbott, Karen Jackson, Andreas Keller, Pauline Matthews, Meryl Silverman, Neal Westgerdes
Foreign Agricultural Service (FAS)	Sally Klusaritz	Joseph Migyanka
Forest Service (FS)	Angela Coleman	Diane Banegas Hutch Brown Kathryn Sosbe
Farm Service Agency (FSA)	Todd Atkinson	Latawnya Dia
Grain Inspection, Packers, and Stockyards Administration (GIPSA)	Dexter Thomas	Dexter Thomas
National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS)	Sue King	Rosemarie Philips

National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA)	Scott Elliott	Scott Elliott
Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)	Terry Bish	Elisa O'Halloran (Web) Catherine Hawkins Mike Giroux
Rural Development (RD)	Andrew Givens	Rural Utilities Service: Michelle Brooks Rural Housing Service: Jacqueline Johnson Rural Business and Cooperative Service: Matthew Mullen
Office of Advocacy and Outreach (OAO)	Christian Obineme	Teresa Welch
Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights (OASCR)	Winona Lake Scott	Kimberly Strickland
Office of Budget and Program Analysis (OBPA)	Andrew Perry	Sam Barkdull
Office of Communications (OC)	Carolyn O'Connor	Carrie Mitchell
Office of the Chief Economist (OCE)	Brenda Chapin	Brenda Chapin
Office of the Chief Information Officer (OCIO)	Joyce M. Hunter, (Acting) Chief Information Officer	David Simpson Matthew Patrick
Office of the Executive Secretariat (OES)	Maureen Wood	Ann Marie Gogniat
Office of the General Counsel (OGC)	Charlene Buckner	Charlene Buckner
Office of the Inspector General (OIG)	Gil Harden	Michael Martin

USDA

United States Department of Agriculture

Office of the Secretary
Washington, D.C. 20250

Dear USDA Employees,

I am writing to ask each of you for your help with plain writing at USDA. Writing in plain, easy to understand language is an important way for us to help better serve the American people. Plain language makes it easier for the public to get the most from our many critical programs and will save us money too.

On President Obama's first day in office he signed a memorandum emphasizing the importance of establishing "a system of transparency, public participation, and collaboration." I am proud of the hard work that all of you have been doing to implement that vision and transform USDA into a more open and accessible organization.

In further support of these goals, last fall the President signed the Plain Writing Act of 2010. The Act requires that, beginning October 13, all Federal Agencies–including USDA–use plain language in new or substantially revised documents that are needed to obtain USDA services or benefits or provide information about them or that explain how to comply with requirements we administer or enforce.

Using plain writing is indispensable to achieving our goals of providing first-class customer service and ensuring access to our programs. When we avoid jargon and excessive acronyms, customers that are new to USDA are more likely to have a positive experience. And when we avoid obscurity and ambiguity, we demonstrate our commitment to serving all Americans, including those who have had trouble accessing our programs in the past.

Plain writing is also an important tool for improving efficiency and saving time and money at USDA. Logically organizing your thoughts, using clear tables and graphics, and approaching a document from the perspective of your audience can reduce the number of calls you receive asking to explain a document or form and the number of hours spent on enforcement because a farmer did not understand a regulation.
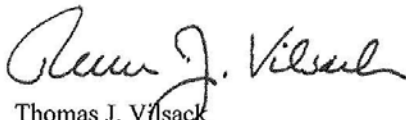
This past summer USDA published our Plain Writing Compliance Report to ensure compliance once the Act comes into full effect October 13, 2011. Through the USDA Plain Language working group, each agency has begun identifying covered documents and providing training and resources to employees. I encourage each of you to visit our Plain Language web page to learn more about the Act.

An Equal Opportunity Employer

Included in the newly updated Plain Language web page you will find resources that will help you write and review documents for the public covered by the Act, as well as help you inform our colleagues in order to comply with the Act. I urge you to explore the USDA website, AgLearn courses, and plainlanguage.gov website to learn about and get training regarding writing and reviewing documents for plain language so that we can serve our country best.

As part of our efforts to strengthen our service at USDA, it is important that we communicate clearly and simply with the American people. I know I can count on you to do your best to make it happen in the months and years ahead.

Sincerely,

Thomas J. Vilsack
Secretary