FY 2023

EVALUATION PLAN

USDA U.S. Department of Agriculture

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Introduction

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA or the Department) serves all Americans by providing effective, innovative, science-based public policy leadership in agriculture, food and nutrition, natural resource protection and management, rural development, and related issues with a commitment to deliver equitable and climate-smart opportunities that inspire and help Americans thrive. USDA achieves its mission via 18 individual Agencies organized under eight Mission Areas, Departmental Administration, and multiple Staff Offices. USDA's vision is an equitable and climate-smart food and agriculture economy that protects and improves the health, nutrition, and quality of life of all Americans; yields healthy land, forests, and clean water; helps rural America thrive; and feeds the world.

The Office of Budget and Program Analysis (OBPA or the Office) oversees and facilitates the performance and strategic management activities of the Department, including development of the USDA Strategic Plan, Agency Priority Goals, deliverables required under the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018 (Evidence Act), and Enterprise Risk Management. The Office is led by the USDA Chief Evaluation Officer. OBPA also chairs the USDA Performance, Evaluation, and Evidence Committee and the Enterprise Risk Management Committee, both of which are comprised of representation from Mission Areas and Departmental Administration, as well as key partners, including the Chief Data Officer and the Statistical Official. These individuals bring diverse perspectives and broad technical expertise to inform OBPA's initiatives and facilitate buy-in among stakeholders across the Department. Partnership with the Chief Data Officer and Statistical Official provides valued insights and advisement on data access, data quality, and statistical methods.

Under the Evidence Act, USDA is required to produce an Evaluation Plan on an annual basis describing the evaluation activities planned for the coming fiscal year (FY). The following Evaluation Plan includes the significant evaluations planned for FY 2023, including the key questions to be answered, required data collections, technical approach and methodologies, and use and dissemination of evaluation findings.

Stakeholder Engagement

Throughout FY 2021 and 2022, OBPA conducted a number of stakeholder engagement activities to inform the development of the FY 2023 Evaluation Plan. USDA's internal stakeholders are organized into the following standard hierarchy to ensure that all levels are appropriately engaged and to provide clarity around roles and responsibilities:

- *Strategic Direction:* Responsible for setting the Department's strategic direction (Secretary, Deputy Secretary, and Sub-Cabinet officials);
- *Departmental Operations:* Responsible for supporting strategic implementation efforts in alignment with the Department's strategic goals and objectives (staff offices such as OBPA, Human Resources, Office of the Chief Information Officer, etc.); and
- *Mission Delivery and Performance:* Responsible for aligning Agency strategic directions and resources with the Department-wide strategic directions and for delivering statutorily required missions, functions, programs, projects, etc. (all USDA Mission Areas and Agencies).

OBPA convened a cross-functional team known as the Evidence Act Working Group (EAWG) to collaborate on the FY 2023 Evaluation Plan and other Evidence Act deliverables. The EAWG included representation from across USDA Mission Areas and Agencies and served as the conduit between OBPA and Mission Area and Agency leadership. OBPA regularly engaged with the EAWG through a series of interactive workshops to develop criteria for the Department's definition of "significant" evaluations and identify planned evaluations for the coming fiscal year.

Significant Evaluations

For the FY 2023 Evaluation Plan, USDA chose to focus on evaluations being conducted by Agencies within the Food, Nutrition, and Customer Service and the Rural Development Mission Areas. These Mission Areas were chosen due to their advanced maturity in evidence-building, particularly with respect to program evaluation. USDA used the following criteria to identify significant evaluations for inclusion in this plan:

- Supports answering a USDA Learning Agenda priority question;
- Required by statute or congressional mandate; and
- Supports a USDA leadership priority.

Evaluation of USDA Broadband Programs

Primary Question	What are the impacts of Rural Development broadband programs on broadband availability and use, as well as on economic (property values, household income, and employment) and social (population growth, healthcare access and availability, and telemedicine) outcomes?
Alignment with USDA Strategic Goal(s)	This evaluation aligns to *Goal 5: Expand Opportunities for Economic Development and Improve Quality of Life in Rural and Tribal Communities* in the USDA FY 2022 -2026 Strategic Plan.
Background and Rationale	This evaluation covers the following programs: the Rural Broadband Access Loan and Loan Guarantee Program, Community Connect Grants, Distance Learning and Telemedicine Grants and Loans, Broadband Initiatives Program, and ReConnect Program. These programs are designed to promote access to broadband in rural areas. E-connectivity is fundamental to economic development, innovation, technological advancement, workforce readiness, and the improvement of quality of life in rural and Tribal communities.
Timeline	Expected completion in FY 2023
Technical Approach and Methodologies	The in-depth evaluation of these programs will utilize rigorous quasi-experimental methods. These methods include matching, matching with regression, difference-in-difference analysis, synthetic matching, instrumental variable analysis, and regression discontinuity. The in-depth evaluation will also use the input-output analysis toolkit to estimate the short-run impacts of building out broadband infrastructure in rural areas. In using this framework, the project analysts will use detailed data as inputs to simulation models to obtain estimates on employment and output for a specific regional economy. The IMPLAN software and database will serve as the modeling platform for this impact analysis. These evaluation projects will be conducted by six trained economists and social scientists at the Innovation Center who have experience in both ex-ante and ex-post evaluation approaches. Some of the projects will be conducted in collaboration with the USDA Economic Research Service (ERS). The Innovation Center is working collaboratively with program areas to obtain administrative data.
Data Sources	Administrative data available from the USDA Rural Utilities Service (RUS) will be used in combination with other external data available from the Bureau of the Census, Bureau of Economic Analysis, Bureau of Labor Statistics, ERS, and Federal Communications Commission. Proprietary datasets such as the National

	Establishment Time Series and Zillow's Assessor and Real Estate Database (ZTRAX) will also be used. The various datasets will be combined using program service area information, such as service area boundaries available from program shapefiles, census blocks, census tracts, and Federal Information Processing Standard (FIPS) county and sub-county codes. For the input-output analysis of the ReConnect Program, data from published engineering cost and economic impact studies will be used in addition to detailed program data. Project cost data housed in the RUS represent a new type of data that are not normally stored in the National Rural Development database but are essential for developing model simulation scenarios.
Challenges and Mitigation Strategies	At the macro level, the lack of shapefiles for program data to delineate service areas forces the analysis to be at the county level or city and town level. Linking program data to external data sources and the lack of publicly available data to measure certain outcomes can also be challenges.
Use and Dissemination	The findings will be shared throughout the Rural Development Mission Area, the wider USDA community, and the Office and Management and Budget through the dissemination of reports and presentations. Rural Development is currently working on the creation of a public-facing website to disseminate findings from evaluations and other analyses. Additionally, projects are published in peer reviewed journals and presented across various conferences. The findings will be delivered in a manner that is most appropriate for the audience. In addition to sharing the findings internally, the evaluation studies will be used to generate peer-reviewed and outreach publications and conference presentations.

Evaluation of USDA Water and Environment Program

Primary Question	What is the impact of the Water and Environment Program (WEP) on water quality, property values (residential, agricultural, and commercial property), income and earnings, poverty, and population growth across the rural-urban continuum?
Alignment with USDA Strategic Goal(s)	This evaluation aligns to *Goal 5: Expand Opportunities for Economic Development and Improve Quality of Life in Rural and Tribal Communities* in the USDA FY 2022 -2026 Strategic Plan.
Background and Rationale	The RUS provides much-needed infrastructure or infrastructure improvements to rural communities. These include water and waste treatment, electric power, and telecommunications services. All of these services help to expand economic opportunities and improve the quality of life for rural residents. The WEP provides loans, grants, and loan guarantees for drinking water, sanitary sewer, solid waste, and storm drainage facilities in rural communities of 10,000 people or fewer. Public bodies, non-profit organizations, and recognized Tribes may qualify for assistance. The WEP also makes grants to non-profit organizations to provide technical assistance and training to help rural communities with their water, wastewater, and solid waste problems. Through the RUS and WEP, rural communities obtain the technical assistance and financing necessary to develop drinking water and waste disposal systems. Safe drinking water and sanitary waste disposal systems are vital not only to public health, but also to the economic vitality of rural America. Rural Development is a leader in helping rural America improve quality of life and increase economic opportunities for rural people. The primary objective of this evaluation project is to study the impacts of the RUS Water and Sewer Loans and Grants Program on changes in economic, demographic, and social outcomes in program recipient communities across the rural-urban spectrum.
Timeline	Expected completion in FY 2023
Technical Approach and Methodologies	The evaluation will utilize rigorous quasi-experimental methods. These methods include difference-in-difference analysis, instrumental variable analysis, and the regression discontinuity method. These evaluation projects will be conducted by six trained economists and social scientists at the Rural Development Innovation Center who have experience in both ex-ante and ex-post

	evaluation approaches. The Innovation Center is working collaboratively with program areas to obtain administrative data.
Data Sources	Administrative data on the WEP will be used in combination with other external data available from the Bureau of the Census, Bureau of Economic Analysis, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Internal Revenue Service, and ERS. In addition, the proprietary datasets on property values such as ZTRAX will be used. The various datasets will be combined using program service area information, such as census tracts and FIPS county and sub-county codes.
Challenges and Mitigation Strategies	The lack of shapefiles for program data to delineate service areas forces the analysis to be at the county level or city and town level. This makes an individual-level analysis at the household or business level almost impossible. Other challenges include linking program data to external data sources and the lack of publicly available data to measure some of the outcomes to be studied.
Use and Dissemination	The findings will be shared throughout the Rural Development Mission Area and the wider USDA community through the dissemination of reports and presentations. The findings will be delivered in a manner that is most appropriate for the audience. In addition to sharing the findings internally, the evaluation studies will be used to generate peer-reviewed and outreach publications and conference presentations.

Evaluation of USDA Community Facilities Program

Primary Question	1. What is the impact of Community Facilities funding on rural hospital closings? 2. What are the impacts of Community Facilities funding on education (i.e., school quality)?
Alignment with USDA Strategic Goal(s)	This evaluation aligns to *Goal 5: Expand Opportunities for Economic Development and Improve Quality of Life in Rural and Tribal Communities* in the USDA FY 2022 -2026 Strategic Plan.
Background and Rationale	Essential community infrastructure is key in ensuring that rural areas enjoy the same basic quality of life and services enjoyed by those in urban areas. The Community Facilities (CF) Programs offer direct loans, loan guarantees, and grants to develop or improve essential public services and facilities in communities across rural America. These amenities help increase the competitiveness of rural communities in attracting and retaining businesses that provide employment and services for their residents. Public bodies, non-profit organizations, and Federally recognized Tribes can use the funds to construct, expand, or improve facilities that provide health care, education, public safety, and public services. Projects include fire and rescue stations, village and town halls, health care clinics, hospitals, adult and childcare centers, assisted living facilities, rehabilitation centers, public buildings, schools, libraries, and many other community-based initiatives. Financing may also cover the costs of land acquisition, professional fees, and purchase of equipment. These facilities not only improve quality of life, but also assist in the development and sustainability of rural America. The purpose of this evaluation is to focus on the two largest areas of investment in the CF investment portfolio: health care and education. The evaluation will focus on the impact of CF on health and education outcomes in recipient facilities and communities.
Timeline	Expected completion in FY 2023
Technical Approach and Methodologies	The evaluation will utilize rigorous quasi-experimental methods. These methods include difference-in-difference analysis, instrumental variable analysis, and the regression discontinuity method. These evaluation projects will be conducted by six trained economists and social scientists at the Rural Development Innovation Center who have experience in both ex-ante and ex-post evaluation approaches. The Innovation Center is working collaboratively with program areas to obtain administrative data.

Data Sources	Administrative data available from the Rural Housing Service CF Programs will be used in combination with other external data available from the Bureau of the Census, Bureau of Economic Analysis, Bureau of Labor Statistics, and National Center for Education Statistics. In addition, proprietary datasets on business registers, such as National Establishment Time Series, will be used. The various datasets will be combined using program service area information, such as recipient facility Data Universal Numbering System numbers, names and addresses, census blocks, census tracts, and FIPS county and sub-county codes.
Challenges and Mitigation Strategies	At the macro level, the lack of shapefiles for program data to delineate service areas forces the analysis to be at the county level or city and town level. Linking program data to external data sources and the lack of publicly available data to measure certain outcomes can also be challenges.
Use and Dissemination	The findings will be shared throughout the Rural Development Mission Area and the wider USDA community through the dissemination of reports and presentations. The findings will be delivered in a manner that is most appropriate for the audience. In addition to sharing the findings internally, the evaluation studies will be used to generate peer-reviewed and outreach publications and conference presentations.

Evaluation of the USDA Single Family Housing Program

Primary Question	1. What is the impact of Single Family Housing Section 502 Direct Loans on measures of housing affordability and stability in recipient tracts or counties? 2. What is the impact of Single Family Housing Section 502 Direct Loans on recipient home values?
Alignment with USDA Strategic Goal(s)	This evaluation aligns to *Goal 5: Expand Opportunities for Economic Development and Improve Quality of Life in Rural and Tribal Communities* in the USDA FY 2022 -2026 Strategic Plan.
Background and Rationale	The Single Family Housing Program gives families and individuals the opportunity to buy, build, repair, or own safe and affordable homes in rural America. Low interest, fixed-rate homeownership loans are provided to qualified persons directly by Rural Development. Financing is also offered at fixed rates and terms through a loan from a private financial institution and guaranteed by Rural Development for qualified persons. Neither of these home loan programs require a down payment. The Section 502 Direct Loan Program assists low- and very-low-income applicants in obtaining decent, safe, and sanitary housing in eligible rural areas by providing payment assistance to increase an applicant's repayment ability. Payment assistance is a type of subsidy that reduces the mortgage payment for a short time. The amount of assistance is determined by the adjusted family income. Loan funds may be used to help low-income individuals or households purchase homes in rural areas. Funds can be used to build, repair, renovate, or relocate a home, or to purchase and prepare sites, including providing water and sewage facilities.
Timeline	Expected completion in FY 2023
Technical Approach and Methodologies	The evaluations will utilize rigorous quasi-experimental methods; namely, difference-in-difference analysis, instrumental variable analysis, and the regression discontinuity method. These evaluation projects will be conducted by six trained economists and social scientists at the Rural Development Innovation Center who have background in both ex-ante and ex-post evaluation approaches. The Innovation Center is working collaboratively with program areas to obtain administrative data.
Data Sources	Administrative data on the Single Family Housing program will be used in combination with other external data available from proprietary datasets on property values such as ZTRAX. Publicly

	available data from the Bureau of the Census, Bureau of Economic Analysis, Bureau of Labor Statistics, and ERS will also be used. The various datasets will be combined using program information such as property addresses, location coordinates of properties, census tracts, and FIPS county and sub-county codes.
Challenges and Mitigation Strategies	At the macro level, lack of shapefiles for program data to delineate service areas forces the analysis to be conducted at the county level or city and town level. Linking program data to external data sources and the lack of publicly available data to measure certain outcomes can also be challenges.
Use and Dissemination	The findings will be shared throughout Rural Development Mission Area and wider USDA community through the dissemination of reports and presentations. The findings will be delivered in a manner that is most appropriate for the audience. In addition to sharing the findings internally the evaluation studies will be used to generate peer-reviewed and outreach publications and conference presentations.

Evaluation of the Overall Impacts of USDA Rural Development Programs

Primary Question	1. What is the impact of major Rural Development programs on rural employment growth? 2. What is the impact of major Rural Development programs on rural income growth? 3. What is the impact of major Rural Development programs on rural poverty rate? 4. What is the impact of major Rural Development programs on rural population change?
Alignment with USDA Strategic Goal(s)	This evaluation aligns to *Goal 5: Expand Opportunities for Economic Development and Improve Quality of Life in Rural and Tribal Communities* in the USDA FY 2022 -2026 Strategic Plan.
Background and Rationale	These evaluations will focus on the collective impacts of all major Rural Development programs on selected socioeconomic outcomes. These major programs include business programs, broadband programs, housing programs, the water and environment program, and the community facilities program. Depending on data availability, the evaluation will focus on the time period between 2005 and 2019. Analysis will be conducted at the zip code level.
Timeline	Expected completion in FY 2023
Technical Approach and Methodologies	These evaluations will utilize multiple regression combined with instrumental variable analysis.
Data Sources	Administrative data on major Rural Development programs will be used in combination with other external data available from the Bureau of the Census, Bureau of Economic Analysis, Bureau of Labor Statistics, and ERS. The various datasets will be combined by zip code.
Challenges and Mitigation Strategies	The biggest challenge will be to identify all outcomes variables and associated covariates at the zip code level without disclosure issues. The availability of all program data that fit the study time-period could also be problematic.

Use and Dissemination	The findings will be shared throughout the Rural Development Mission Area and wider USDA community through the dissemination of reports and presentations. The findings will be delivered in a manner that is most appropriate for the audience. In addition to sharing the findings internally, the evaluation studies will be used to generate peer-reviewed and outreach publications and conference presentations.

Using Robotic Process Automation or Related Technology in SNAP Eligibility Processes

Primary Question	How does the use of Robotic Process Automation improve the efficiency of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program application processing?
Alignment with USDA Strategic Goal(s)	This evaluation aligns to *Goal 4: Make Safe, Nutritious Food Available to All Americans* in the USDA FY 2022 – 2026 Strategic Plan.
Background and Rationale	Several States have piloted the use of Robotic Process Automation (RPA), also known as bots, for certain tasks in their Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) eligibility process. RPA is a new technological initiative in the human services sector and involves business process automation that allows computers to automate and complete certain simple repetitive processes or tasks. This can increase efficiency, streamline processes, and improve service delivery by completing tasks that would require caseworker time. This evaluation will assess the efficacy of using this technology to assist in application processing in up to three States by assessing the impacts on caseworker time, accuracy of tasks completed by the computer, and administrative costs, as well as documenting the benefits and challenges to SNAP agencies.
Timeline	Expected completion in FY 2023
Technical Approach and Methodologies	States will collect information on motivations, opportunities, challenges, costs, and benefits of RPA projects through in-depth interviews with key informants in the study. Analysts will conduct cost-benefit analyses using administrative data to assess the impacts, costs, and benefits of RPA projects on administrative processes.
Data Sources	Data will include qualitative information from interviews with staff in State agencies and administrative cost data.
Challenges and Mitigation Strategies	Administrative data may not have the required level of granularity to answer all evaluation questions.
Use and Dissemination	The findings will be presented to USDA policy officials and program staff via briefings. Results of the evaluation will also be posted publicly on the USDA website.

Assessment of Mobile Technologies for Using SNAP Benefits

Primary Question	To what extent do mobile technologies affect participant access to Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits?
Alignment with USDA Strategic Goal(s)	This evaluation aligns to *Goal 4: Make Safe, Nutritious Food Available to All Americans* in the USDA FY 2022 – 2026 Strategic Plan.
Background and Rationale	The Agricultural Act of 2018 authorizes the use of mobile technologies for the purpose of accessing SNAP benefits. This allows SNAP participants to input their Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) cards into a mobile technology, such as Apple Pay or Google Pay, and make SNAP purchases at the point-of-sale without the presence of the EBT card. The Act requires that the Food and Nutrition Service approve no more than five projects to pilot the use of this technology and subsequently determine if mobile technology should be authorized Nationwide. This study will assess the pilots in the areas of participant access, ease of use, and program integrity to facilitate the decision-making around the broad authorization of the use of mobile technologies.
Timeline	Expected completion in FY 2026
Technical Approach and Methodologies	This study will assess the pilot projects in the areas of participant access, ease of use, and program integrity to facilitate the determination of whether to broadly authorize the use of mobile technologies. Process and outcome evaluations will be conducted in up to five States that participate in the pilot program.
Data Sources	Data collection will include interviews with stakeholders and document review from each pilot project. Analysts will also utilize SNAP administrative data from State agencies and retailer characteristics data.
Challenges and Mitigation Strategies	Obtaining the needed data from EBT processors and SNAP State agencies poses a challenge.
Use and Dissemination	The findings will be presented to USDA policy officials and program staff via briefings. Results of the evaluation will also be posted publicly on the USDA website.

Understanding the Relationship Between Poverty, Well-Being, and Food Security

Primary Question	What are the key factors associated with variations in food security rates in persistent-poverty counties?
Alignment with USDA Strategic Goal(s)	This evaluation aligns to *Goal 4: Make Safe, Nutritious Food Available to All Americans* in the USDA FY 2022 – 2026 Strategic Plan.
Background and Rationale	Research has shown that the economic and demographic circumstances of households are closely correlated with food security status. However, not all households with similar circumstances experience the same food security status. This evaluation will identify measures of poverty and well-being associated with household food security status among SNAP-eligible participants and non-participants in persistent-poverty counties, defined as counties where 20% or more of their population lived in poverty in the last four decennial Censuses. Moving beyond household income, many dimensions of well-being and material deprivation may affect food security status and SNAP participation , such as mental health, depression, health-related quality of life, disablement, medical expenditures, alcohol or opioid addiction, place of residence, and within-household sharing of resources.
Timeline	Expected completion in FY 2026
Technical Approach and Methodologies	Analysts will conduct county-level representative surveys of household food security, well-being, and material hardship measures in at least six persistent-poverty counties to help identify factors other than income that impact food security status. The analysts will also conduct in-depth interviews with a subsample of households in these counties to provide additional context for the survey findings. Counties will represent a variety of spatial types (urban, suburban, and rural) and other policy-relevant characteristics. Collecting representative, qualitative data at the county level will enable improved estimates of county-level food security status, as official data at this granular level are unavailable. This data is unavailable because the USDA has a partnership with Census to develop one nationwide food security rate once per year, as such, there is no official federal rate or data collection at anything lower than that National rate.
Data Sources	Data sources will consist of county-level representative surveys of household food security, well-being, and material hardship measures in at least six persistent-poverty counties, and in-depth interviews with a subsample of households in six counties.

Challenges and Mitigation Strategies	Ensuring State and participant cooperation and sufficient response rates will pose a challenge. USDA will offer incentives to participant respondents to increase response rates.
Use and Dissemination	The findings will be presented to USDA policy officials and program staff via briefings. The results of the evaluation will also be posted publicly on the USDA website.

Acronyms and Abbreviations

CF	Community Facilities
EAWG	Evidence Act Working Group
EBT	Electronic Benefit Transfer
ERS	Economic Research Service
Evidence Act	Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018
FIPS	Federal Information Processing Standard
FY	Fiscal year
OBPA	Office of Budget and Program Analysis
RPA	Robotic Process Automation
RUS	Rural Utilities Service
SNAP	Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program
USDA	U.S. Department of Agriculture
WEP	Water and Environment Program
ZTRAX	Zillow's Assessor and Real Estate Database

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