




United States Department of Agriculture

Office of the Secretary
Washington, D.C. 20250

To: Subcabinet Leadership, Agency Administrators and Staff Office Directors
USDA Chief Operating Officers
USDA Human Resources Directors

From: Thomas J. Vilsack 
Secretary

Subject: Building a Model Workplace with Expanded Telework and Work Flexibilities - Our First Steps

Date: March 11, 2021

During the USDA Employee Town Hall on Thursday, March 4, I affirmed that USDA remains in a maximum telework posture due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Looking beyond the pandemic, I pledged to look at workplace flexibilities across the board. As a starting point this will include:

- increased telework options,
- expanded use of virtual and remote duty stations, and
- enhanced work schedule flexibilities.

Offering a variety of strategic workplace flexibilities allows us to recruit and retain the best talent that reflects the diversity of our country, improve employee morale, and make USDA an employer of choice. In support of this commitment, this memorandum outlines three initial steps we will take effective immediately to restore the confidence of our employees and morale among our workforce.

Step 1: Immediate Repeal of USDA's January 2018 Telework Directive

The workplace and how we will go about performing our work in the future have changed significantly over the last year due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The changes to the telework policy made in 2018 had significant negative impacts on employee morale and retention, as well as USDA's ability to recruit top talent. Therefore, the January 2018 telework policy is repealed. The USDA telework policy going forward is the following:

A. Maintenance of Maximum Telework During the Pandemic

We will remain in a maximized telework posture in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. USDA's [COVID-19 workplace safety plan](#) as well as official guidance from CDC and the White House COVID-19 team will guide decisions about when to relax the current emphasis on maximum telework.

B. Interim Telework Policy

Effective immediately, USDA is establishing an interim telework policy. Under this policy, where appropriate and feasible based on the work involved and pertinent collective bargaining agreements, managers are authorized to permit employees to telework up to four days per week and eight days per pay period. **To be clear, the interim telework policy does NOT change our current maximum telework posture due to the pandemic.**

C. Permanent Telework Policy

Over the coming weeks and months, we will work on permanently revising our telework policy based on the principles of USDA's 2014 telework policy to reflect our workforce needs by considering ideas and feedback from staff while complying with any bargaining unit obligations that we have with our unions partners. As we take this more comprehensive review, we are also taking immediate interim action.

We trust that our managers will implement this guidance in an equitable way in keeping with our commitment to our staff while making sure USDA programs are accessible to all and delivering on USDA's mission. Going forward, USDA job announcements for telework-eligible positions should reflect the ability to telework up to four days per week, based upon the duties of specific positions. Supervisors and employees must also jointly review and revise existing telework agreements as necessary. In making any revisions to telework agreements, labor management agreements must be followed.

Step 2: Engagement with Labor Unions, Employees and Supervisors, and Advisory Groups

Rolling back the 2018 telework directive is an immediate, first step but not the end point. To re-envision USDA's workplace, including space utilization, we need everyone's ideas – employees, supervisors (including senior leadership), unions, and recognized employee organizations. **Over the coming weeks, we will design and launch surveys for employees and supervisors to provide input on what work at USDA should look like in the post COVID-19 era.** We will also convene USDA's labor unions to gather their ideas on telework and workplace flexibilities. USDA agencies and staff offices with recognized employee organizations or similar structures may also leverage these groups to obtain feedback. More information about this will be shared in the weeks ahead.

Step 3: Allowing for Virtual Duty Stations for Positions that can be Effectively Performed Remotely

While many USDA employees must perform their duties on-site due to the nature of the position (e.g., inspectors, graders, laboratory personnel, and fire fighters, among others), there are many other positions that can be performed equally effectively remotely. In fact, there could be great benefit to having staff of all levels of our organization living and working in the very communities that USDA serves. Over the last year, USDA employees have played a vital role in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic while continuing operations of government, and a significant portion of USDA employees have done their

work remotely. In addition to the increased availability of telework, we want to evaluate positions that are suitable to be located at virtual duty stations, allowing greater flexibility to secure talent wherever it exists. **I am asking mission areas, agencies, and staff offices to begin a strategic and equitable review of the current duty stations of their positions, current and planned recruitments, and to identify those positions that may be effectively performed either remotely or virtually beyond the pandemic.** In conducting this systematic review, labor unions', employees', and supervisors' ideas and feedback should be considered, and the results of these reviews should be transparent to employees and supervisors. Additional guidance on conducting these reviews is forthcoming.

We must work together to make USDA a safe, fair, and rewarding workplace for all employees. We want our staff to love to work every day, doing the important work that will help to move our country forward. The three steps outlined in this memo are just the beginning to restoring the confidence of our workforce and for ensuring USDA attracts a talented and diverse workforce representative of America.

Thank you for helping to make USDA a great place to work.