



REMARKS

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Remarks as Prepared for Administrator Dr. Gregory Parham
National Association of State Departments of Agriculture (NASDA)
Winter Policy Conference

(RESTON, VA, Feb. 7, 2012) Thank you. It's always a pleasure to be a part of NASDA's meetings and to have the opportunity to visit with my State colleagues.

I am pleased to have with me a number of other APHIS officials, including: John Clifford, Deputy Administrator for Veterinary Services; Chester Gipson, Deputy Administrator for Animal Care; Bill Clay, Deputy Administrator for Wildlife Services; Rebecca Bech, Deputy Administrator for Plant Protection and Quarantine; and Mike Gregoire, Deputy Administrator for Biotechnology and Regulatory Services. They'll each be speaking with you a little later.

Budget Climate

As you are all aware, for the past few years the APHIS budget has been shrinking. To put it into perspective, since 2010 our budget has decreased by approximately \$87 million, or 10 percent. Despite the budget decrease, our core mission and responsibilities remain the same.

When I spoke to you in September, I talked about the budget challenges we were facing. I told you that change was on the horizon. Today, that change is already underway and I would like to ask you—our State partners—to join the conversation as we continue to make some important and difficult decisions.

But first, I'm going to update you briefly on changes already in progress.

Blueprint for Stronger Service

Last month, Secretary Vilsack announced USDA's Blueprint for Stronger Service. The blueprint is a plan to help agriculture continue to drive America's economy by streamlining operations and cutting costs. It is USDA's effort to ensure that, in this era of reduced budgets, the folks who depend on us continue to receive our support.

One key component of the blueprint is the closing and consolidation of offices.

As Deputy Secretary Merrigan recently outlined to NASDA members, APHIS is closing a number of its offices both in the United States and abroad. By the end of this fiscal year, APHIS plans to close 15 offices in 11 States and 5 international offices.

I assure you that we carefully considered these closures—and the alternatives—and that we have worked hard to minimize the impact on program delivery. We recognize the need to ensure that our State and stakeholder partners continue to receive our services and we're balancing that with the need to reduce spending.

As this example indicates, although the budget climate has created some unique challenges, the Department and APHIS are already tackling them by improving processes, finding efficiencies, and maximizing the use of our resources.

Maximizing Resources

2011 Business Process Improvements (BPI)

Early in fiscal year 2011, APHIS began using a variety of models—especially Lean Six Sigma—to review both internal and external processes with the goal of determining where improvements could be made.

The Agency targeted several key areas for improvement including:

- the process of licensing veterinary biologics,
- the process for granting nonregulated status to genetically engineered organisms,
- risk assessments and rulemaking process for imports, and
- the Agency's enforcement process.

IES Notifications

I won't go into a great deal of detail about these efforts since we recently discussed them on two NASDA calls. But I would like to talk for just a moment about that last item—streamlining the Agency's enforcement process.

In recent years, APHIS' backlog of open investigations has increased to well over 2,000. Such a large backlog of open investigations has hampered the Agency's ability to swiftly address serious violations. That's why we're taking steps to reduce the number of open investigations.

As you know, some of the cases that APHIS investigates are referred to us by the States. When we talked about this effort in January, many of you wanted to know how you would be notified about the outcome of such cases.

At the time, we weren't able to provide a definitive answer. Since then, I've directed the members of our enforcement taskforce to ensure the appropriate program personnel reach out to their State counterparts as these investigations are closed. It's important that you know the resolution of these investigations, whether or not they result in an enforcement action.

Again, the goal of these changes is to allow us to focus our resources on the most serious violations so we can address the biggest risks to agricultural health and the welfare of animals.

2012 BPI

The Agency has identified a number of new BPI projects for 2012 and set some new goals, including:

- reviewing the inspection process to enhance enforcement of the Animal Welfare Act and the Horse Protection Act, and
- improving the timeliness of environmental documentation during an animal or plant emergency.

I'm confident that such efforts will better position the Agency to tackle whatever lies ahead.

Preparing for the Future

Theodore Roosevelt once said, "In any moment of decision, the best thing you can do is the right thing, the next best thing is the wrong thing, and the worst thing you can do is nothing."

Decisions—especially the ones we face now—are difficult to make. But it's imperative that we decide strategically before circumstance decides for us.

In making these tough choices, we are asking ourselves a few key questions:

- Where are we currently putting our efforts?
- Is the return worth the cost?
- What functions do we perform that are mission critical?

Internally, APHIS has been conducting a series of budget tabletop exercises to assist us in thinking critically about these questions.

But these are not decisions that APHIS can make alone. It's important that we gather the input of all of our stakeholders, particularly our State partners.

That's why on February 27th, APHIS is hosting an open meeting in D.C. to talk about the Agency's budget and modernization initiatives. A formal announcement about the meeting will be made in the Federal Register later this week.

We want to provide context for stakeholders regarding our current budget realities and outline what the situation may look like in 2013 based on the President's budget.

Most important, we're interested in hearing about those APHIS activities stakeholders value most. We want to know where and how stakeholders think the Agency might make responsible changes.

The Federal Register notice includes open-ended questions to help us gather feedback about the Agency's critical services and our ability to maximize partnerships both in and outside of government.

NADSA's Unique Contribution

Some of you may recall that we initiated a similar State-focused survey and analysis in 2007 to strengthen our State-Federal partnership. Although we weren't facing the same budget challenges back then, we did have some fairly significant communications challenges.

That undertaking, which was referred to as the APHIS-NASDA Collaboration Assessment, resulted in much stronger communication and a better relationship between our organizations. The benefits of that assessment continue to be evident today, and we hope to have similar success with this broader stakeholder survey.

Given that NASDA is more than just a stakeholder and is, in fact, one of our most important partners, we especially look forward to hearing your insight and perspective on the questions we've posed.

I recognize that States are facing significant budget challenges as well and many of you may be unable to attend the meeting in person.

To make your participation possible, APHIS will host a live Webcast of the meeting.

In addition, I'd like to kick-start the conversation today by hearing some of your feedback directly. What do you see as APHIS' top priorities? How can we responsibly implement changes to minimize disruptions to our customers and maximize mission fulfillment? And finally, what other critical information do you think APHIS leaders should have at the decision table?

We'll save this conversation until everyone from APHIS has finished presenting, but hopefully that will give you a few minutes to ponder these questions.

Closing

I look forward to hearing your thoughts today and working closely with you during this time of change. It will not be easy, but I know that with input and assistance from one another, APHIS and its State partners will come through these lean times stronger and better equipped to deal with whatever the future has in store.

Thank you.

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