



REMARKS

United States Department of Agriculture • Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service • Legislative and Public Affairs
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Remarks by Administrator Dr. Gregory Parham APHIS Public Meeting for Stakeholders

(WASHINGTON, D.C., Feb.27, 2012) Good afternoon. I would like to thank each of you for taking the time to join us today.

This is the first time we have brought everyone together in a forum like this to update you on important issues affecting APHIS and to learn more about your individual concerns as well.

These are unique budget times. APHIS knows that our stakeholders are interested in learning what that means for our programs and for our services. And while we don't have all of the answers, it's important to share what we do know and to get your feedback as we move forward.

For those of you who haven't yet had an opportunity to meet me, I am Dr. Gregory Parham, Administrator for APHIS. I have had the great privilege of serving as Administrator since April of 2011. Prior to that, I had a longstanding relationship with APHIS and with USDA. Some of you may know, I am a second generation APHIS employee. My father, also a veterinarian, spent his entire civilian career in APHIS and its predecessor agencies. He instilled in me both an appreciation and respect for public service generally and an understanding of what it means to safeguard agriculture specifically.

I started out as an APHIS veterinary student trainee. I won't say the year. I became a USDA employee in 1982. By 2006, I had worked my way back to APHIS as the Chief Information Officer, then as Deputy Administrator for Marketing and Regulatory Programs Business Services, and most recently then as Associate Administrator.

One of the things that I did along the way, particularly the time that I spent at Johns Hopkins, was looking at the various ways to manage, and during that time—it was the mid 80's—the big thing then was contingency approach to management.

Essentially what that is is an approach that's based on the idea that there is no one best way to manage and that in order to be effective in planning, organizing, leading, controlling—all of those different things—you must tie them to the particular circumstances you find that the organization is facing. It's always about what is the right thing to do, should we have this kind of approach, that kind of approach.

One of the things we have found is that really when it comes down to it, there's no one universal answer to these questions and it varies and changes over time.

The right thing to do depends on a complex variety of critical environmental and internal contingencies. So it's part of that that we are going to discuss today.

During my years at APHIS, I have had the opportunity to see the Agency's work from different angles. So I know and value different perspectives.

I am also deeply committed to the principles of partnership, cooperation, and collaboration with stakeholders. I believe these tenants are fundamental to public service and that they have been the cornerstones of USDA since its inception.

This year celebrates the 40th anniversary of APHIS, which is pretty impressive, but also USDA is celebrating its 150th anniversary. When President Abraham Lincoln created USDA, it was referred to as the People's Department.

And while not diverse by today's standards, Lincoln's cabinet was distinguished by the fact that the members were not cronies. In fact, in her biography of Lincoln, historian Doris Kearns Goodwin refers to this group as a "Team of Rivals."

President Lincoln surrounded himself with people who could question his assumptions. He brought in political opponents such as Salmon Chase and William Seward, as well as advisors whose temperaments differed from his own.

There were many fierce debates but in the end it was said that everyone felt that they had been heard. I think it's safe to say that the Nation benefited greatly from this diversity of values, viewpoints, and styles.

It is with that in mind that we have invited all of you here today. It's wonderful when a variety of individuals and groups with unique perspectives can come together to hear about APHIS' priorities and budget situation and to have a chance to be heard.

So once again, thank you all for joining us today. Your input is invaluable.

Introduction of APHIS Management Team

I am pleased to have with me today a number of other APHIS officials including, of course, as he was introduced, our Associate Administrator Kevin Shea.

Since Kevin was appointed as Associate Administrator in 2004, APHIS has benefited greatly from his wealth of experience.

He is a strategic thinker who has always focused on the Agency's future. His leadership is one of our Agency's secret weapons, and he brings a unique portfolio of skills and talents to the table.

Kevin has made exceptional customer service a personal mission of his and he has spearheaded the streamlining of many APHIS functions through our business process

improvements, or BPI. Shortly Kevin will talk in greater detail about the budget picture that we face and our BPI projects.

But before he does that, I would like to introduce the rest of the APHIS leadership team and to talk broadly about the Agency's current situation and priorities.

Here today we have sitting on the front row here Bethany Jones, who is our Deputy Administrator for Legislative and Public Affairs; Joanne Munno, who is the Deputy Administrator for Marketing and Regulatory Programs Business Services; Dawn Tucker, who's the Acting Chief Information Officer; Marilyn Holland, who currently leads our Project Management Office; Chris Zakarka, Deputy Administrator for Policy and Program Development; Chester Gipson, Deputy Administrator for Animal Care; Bill Clay, Deputy Administrator for Wildlife Services; Mike Gregoire, Deputy Administrator for Biotechnology and Regulatory Services; Kenneth Johnson, Director of Civil Rights Enforcement and Compliance; Beverly Simmons, who is our Acting Deputy Administrator for International Services; and Osama El' Lissy, Associate Deputy Administrator for Plant Protection and Quarantine.

Rebecca Bech, our Deputy Administrator for Plant Protection and Quarantine, is currently attending the North American Plant Protection Organization meeting in Mexico and is unable to be here today. But we certainly want to thank Osama for joining us. And then John Clifford, who is our Deputy Administrator for Veterinary Services, who is with us as well.

Guiding Principles

What then are some of the guiding principles that we can think about as we look at our situation both currently and in the future? I am honored first of all to work with a dedicated team like this and as I mentioned earlier, this marks the 40th anniversary of APHIS and a lot has changed in those 40 years and changes will continue to occur.

But one thing remains consistent: APHIS is dedicated to its mission. And it's the mission that serves as a guiding principle to me and to this leadership team as we tackle the budget challenges that we now face.

The APHIS mission is to protect the health and value of American agriculture and natural resources. That's a pretty straightforward mission. And our priority in carrying out that mission is the boots-on-the ground work that keeps agriculture safe, from pastures in Montana to gardens in Maryland. Our mission is the core of what we do and the essential services we provide to our customers.

So when we talk about making strategic changes in response to reduced funding, we are not talking about limiting mission delivery or ceasing core mission functions. Rather, we are talking about peeling away some of those layers of bureaucracy that can frustrate stakeholders and slow down service, while still preserving the mission.

That means refocusing on carrying out those services that only the Federal government—

only APHIS—can do, like issuing permits or licenses, regulating genetically engineered organisms, or inspecting facilities for compliance with regulations.

Another key core service that APHIS intends to continue to focus on, especially in these lean economic times, is the facilitation of trade.

Forty years ago, when APHIS was just starting out, providing exceptional customer service may have meant simply testing cattle for diseases or placing quarantines on the movement of certain types of plants.

While that still is an important service, facilitating trade and helping customers meet the demand for their products is an increasingly critical part of what we do.

We know that our stakeholders need us to promptly process export certificates and import permits. You need us to be ready to move at the speed of your business, and I can assure you that doing so remains a high priority for us.

Budget Overview

As you all know, America is recovering from the worst recession since the Great Depression. Households across the country continue to struggle and are working hard to stay within their budget.

The same is true for Federal agencies such as ours.

For the past several years, APHIS' budget has been shrinking. To put it into perspective, since 2010 our budget has decreased by approximately \$87 million, or roughly 10 percent.

To address these serious budget challenges, APHIS has identified a strategic and comprehensive approach to reduce spending and save money, looking at obvious discretionary cuts like travel, phone costs, supplies, and printing; process streamlining that enable us to save money while still protecting agriculture and meeting customer needs; workforce reductions; and office closures.

BPI Overview

I want to talk in a bit more detail about a few of these cost-saving endeavors, specifically our efforts to improve our processes, find efficiencies, and maximize the use of our resources.

I am referring to the BPI efforts I mentioned previously.

Early in fiscal year 2011, APHIS began using a variety of formal models to review internal and external processes to determine where improvements could be made and efficiencies gained.

We targeted several key areas for improvement: the licensing of veterinary biologics, the

granting of nonregulated status to genetically engineered (GE) organisms, risk assessment and rulemaking for imports, and the Agency's process for enforcing its regulations.

I am pleased that we expect to shorten the average time taken up by these business processes by between 20 and 76 percent, a change that will save money and directly benefit our customers. For instance, by streamlining the GE organism petition process, APHIS anticipates reducing timelines by 13–15 months.

Workforce Reduction

While no agency wants to see workforce reductions, we had to face the reality that our budget can no longer support the number of employees that we had. As a result, we made the difficult choice to implement hiring controls and offered early separation and early retirement programs to nontechnical or support service employees.

We are also seeking additional authority to offer such programs to employees in all other job series except those in veterinary medicine and animal health technicians.

Together all of these cost savings efforts have produced some savings—but not nearly enough. As you all know, we made the decision to close a number of our offices both in the United States and abroad.

Blueprint for Stronger Service

The closing and consolidation of these offices is a key component of Secretary Vilsack's Blueprint for Stronger Service. The Blueprint is a plan to help agriculture continue to drive America's economy by streamlining 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 services and our support.

By the end of this year, APHIS plans to close 15 offices domestically in 11 States and 5 international offices in 5 different countries. I assure you that we carefully considered these closures—and the alternatives—and we made decisions that will minimize the impact on program delivery.

Some of the offices closed were no longer necessary. For example, several offices are closing as a result of the successful eradication of Karnal bunt in Texas. Although some Veterinary Services field offices will be closing, we will continue to have staff doing on-the-ground work but they will report to supervisors in a consolidated office in an adjacent State.

We recognize the need to ensure that our stakeholders continue to receive our services, and we're balancing that with the need to reduce spending.

The President's 2013 Budget

When we look at the President's 2013 budget, we see the budget cuts are likely to continue into the foreseeable future. On February 13, the President submitted his 2013 budget request to Congress. The budget calls for a decrease in APHIS' funding by an additional \$54 million, or 6.6 percent.

Despite the budget decrease, our core mission and responsibilities remain the same, and that is a huge challenge. APHIS takes great pride in our ability to achieve results while still seeking new ways to use our expertise to assist our customers and stakeholders.

Over the years, we have readily taken on new roles and responsibilities and expanded our traditional activities because we wanted to do more, and we felt we could help.

It is unfortunate, but in today's fiscal climate, we can no longer afford to carry out programs simply because we can.

APHIS Modernization

When we look at modernization one of the things that some of you know is that last year we evaluated a range of different options for modernizing the Agency. The evaluation document outlined a series of options to envision a leaner, more efficient APHIS. It was intended to facilitate an internal discussion about possible strategic reactions to the budget.

And I know the evaluation created some concern among our stakeholders, so I'd like to clarify the situation. And that clarity is here:

APHIS does not have a plan in place for a reorganized infrastructure. Let me repeat. APHIS does not have a plan in place for a reorganized infrastructure.

Rather, the evaluation was part of an ongoing discussion and today we are asking you to join in that conversation.

What is evident and cannot be ignored is that we cannot afford to continue operating as we have in the recent past.

We want to hear from all of you. But we also feel it's essential to have an opportunity to gather our stakeholders together where everyone can be heard in the same venue, and where you can also hear each other's input and concerns.

Let's face it: each group has its own interests that they're eager to promote and protect. That's certainly understandable. But when it comes to budget cuts, difficult choices must and will be made. And there is just no way to make the reductions painless.

The truth is, none of APHIS' programs will be insulated from the impact of budget cuts. We are all truly in the same boat so it's important that we be transparent and openly discuss the

best way to navigate the waters.

Now, to speak to you in greater detail about the budget and how BPI is helping APHIS achieve its budget goals, please join me in welcoming APHIS' Associate Administrator Kevin Shea.

Associate Administrator Kevin Shea Speaks

Thank you, Kevin. As Kevin said, APHIS has made some significant strides in finding efficiencies. However, if we sustain another 6.6 percent reduction in 2013, further changes will be necessary. So it is imperative that we continue to change the way we do business and we cannot do that alone. We need the input of those we serve.

Stakeholder/Partnership Effort

It's been said that "the single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place." With such a large network of stakeholders, it's all too easy for us to fall into this trap and believe that we have communicated and listened effectively.

That is why the APHIS Administrator's office is taking a more proactive approach to communicating with our stakeholders, including the American public.

An important aspect of our strategy to enhance communication is an emphasis on increasing the frequency of stakeholder meetings and better utilizing existing meetings to share information. That might mean periodic meetings of all APHIS stakeholders such as the one we are holding today, but there will also be times when smaller meetings focusing on a specific topics will be more appropriate.

For example, this July APHIS and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) will co-host a stakeholder conference focused on the agricultural quarantine inspection program at U.S. ports-of-entry.

This conference will bring together groups representing the animal product, plant product, and shipping industries as well Federal and State regulatory officials to discuss pest exclusion efforts and trade facilitation. Most importantly, the conference will give APHIS and DHS an opportunity to get input from its stakeholders on how we can better serve their needs.

For obvious reasons, it's not feasible to hold a meeting each time the Administrator's office wants to communicate with stakeholders. In the last year, we have standardized stakeholder outreach as part of our broader communication efforts. In addition, to keep you informed on a day-to-day basis, we've created a stakeholder information page on the APHIS website.

Stakeholder Survey

From that page you can also access a survey that APHIS recently launched. The survey

will help us gather more in-depth feedback about what stakeholders see as important.

Making decisions—especially the type of decisions we now face—is not easy. And these decisions are not ones that APHIS can or should make alone. To ensure that our decisionmaking is fully informed by a diversity of opinions, we are asking stakeholders some key questions:

First, what are the most essential services APHIS provides? Second, how can we best provide these services? Third, what changes can we make to enhance customer service? And fourth, how might we strengthen current partnerships or collaborate in new ways to accomplish critical mission activities?

We decided that the survey should coincide with this meeting to ensure that the information presented today could inform your responses. In fact, as you came in you saw that we have two computers set up in the lobby. So if you'd like to respond after the meeting, please do so. You can also respond through the APHIS Web site or through the Federal Register.

The survey and other activities I have mentioned today are just some of the ways the Administrator's office is working to keep the lines of communication open. And that communication is the first step that allows us all to work together to ensure that APHIS' mission is fulfilled.

As Henry Ford once said, "If everyone is moving forward together, then success will take care of itself."

Importance of the Stakeholder/DA Relationship

I want to be clear that although those of us who work in the Administrator's office want to find new ways to engage stakeholders directly, we do not want to replace existing relationships you have with other APHIS personnel. Because we do value those partnerships and know that you do too.

For example, I know that many of you have longstanding relationships with the various APHIS Deputy Administrators that were introduced earlier. As you know, the Deputies are highly capable individuals who are very knowledgeable about their individual program areas.

One goal is to enhance those existing relationships and to build new ones. I think it's safe to say the Administrator's office can offer a unique perspective: a high-level view across the entire Agency. As you can imagine, there are times when such a vantage point is useful.

Until now, stakeholders have primarily gotten the benefit of that perspective by first engaging a Deputy's office and then—if necessary—the Deputy contacts the Administrator's office.

But I want APHIS stakeholders to know that my door and Kevin's door is open. The APHIS Administrator's office welcomes the opportunity to engage with stakeholders directly on those specific issues they feel will benefit from our perspective.

Another excellent resource, as Mr. Shea already mentioned, is our Chief Advisor on Government, Academic, and Industry Partnerships, Cindy Smith. Cindy has been instrumental in organizing this meeting and is committed to developing APHIS' stakeholder relationships.

Whether issues are raised to my office through the Deputies, directly from our external partners, or through Cindy, APHIS wants to hear from you.

Closing

In closing, a key component in good communication isn't talking, it's listening.

So, I think I've talked long enough for now and I'd like to turn the conversation over to you—to hear how you as APHIS' stakeholders would like us to communicate with you, particularly in these times of change. What type of interaction do you need from APHIS and what can we do better to facilitate the flow of information?

And of course, feel free to ask questions of us or offer your insight into specific survey questions. And please keep in mind that we have a number of stakeholders here today and we'd like to hear from as many as possible.

You will see that there's a microphone set up in the middle of the auditorium for your use. When you step up to the microphone, it's important that you identify yourself by name and affiliation before speaking. It's good for us to know who we're talking to and will benefit our Web cast and our written transcript.

The floor is yours and I look forward to hearing your feedback—today, and in the future. Thank you very much.

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