

Over the past several years, there have been a number of reviews of how the agriculture mission is being carried out and supported in Customs and Border Protection (CBP) and the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS). In addition, there has been interest in recent months in legislation to return the agriculture inspection function to APHIS. The intense interest in the effectiveness of the agriculture mission became an opportunity for our two agencies to evaluate how far we have come since the March 2003 reorganization and identify ways we could strengthen the mission in both organizations. We agreed to establish a Joint Task Force, which met for the first time in May of this year.

The Joint Task Force developed 10 action plans addressing structure and leadership; outreach and communication; joint agency planning; performance measures; regulatory enforcement; emergency response; information management; resources; training; and pest identification. The Task Force met again in early September to assess progress and further the implementation process.

The work of the Task Force will not be finished when the last action plan is implemented. The action plan for joint agency planning recommended establishment of the Task Force as the mechanism to fulfill the ongoing joint planning needs of APHIS and CBP and both agencies have endorsed this recommendation. The attached charter explains the full scope of the Task Force's work.

In the meantime, progress on implementation of the action plans continues. Highlights of the progress made to date include:

Partnership Council: Begun development of a charter for a partnership council to include officials from the National Association of State Departments of Agriculture, the National Plant Board, and the U.S. Animal Health Association. The Council will bring a cooperator and stakeholder perspective to the process and monitor progress on the 10 action plans. We anticipate that the Council will meet quarterly, with at least one meeting per year face-to-face.

Structure and Leadership: A 12-24-month timeline has been established for developing a risk-based staffing model, developing position descriptions for new managerial agriculture positions at every level of the CBP field infrastructure, and hiring the new managers. We have already put together a team to develop the staffing model and begun discussions with CBP Directors of Field Operations (DFO) on the proposed changes

Outreach and Communication: We have begun the planning process for a large meeting of stakeholders, which we expect to hold in the second quarter of FY 08. Participants will include key CBP and Plant Protection and Quarantine (PPQ) participants, State officials, and perhaps other stakeholders as well. This will be followed by meetings at the Director of Field Operations, State Plant Regulatory Officials, and State Plant Health Directors at a more local level. We have established a timeline for developing a communications plan; enhancing CBP's web site for agricultural accomplishments; and other outreach tasks.

Joint Agency Planning: In addition to establishing the Task Force as the central planning body for the two agencies, we have developed list of joint plans that will be done annually, developed a timeline for creating calendar of joint planning activities, begun to establish standard operating procedures for approving annual plans; and developed a process for addressing ad hoc planning needs. We have also included CBP in PPQ Headquarters and Regional Operational Planning events.

Performance measures: We have scheduled a joint “data summit” for November 2007 to determine what data is needed for measuring performance for delivery of the mission. We have already developed proposed performance measures for passenger baggage, vehicles, pedestrians, mail, and cargo and drafted a memo for PPQ and CBP field employees on implementing the new performance measures. We are reemphasizing the importance of passenger baggage inspection due to declining inspection levels.

Emergency Response: We have developed a list of action items that include defining a process to identify types of joint agricultural emergency events; evaluating joint response needs; and developing a joint comprehensive emergency response plan that includes procedures for notification, deployment, and communication for an agricultural emergency response.

Information Management: We developed timeline for identifying organizations and subject matter experts involved in IT system development; cataloging issues regarding IT systems and analysis for agriculture programs; and developing and monitoring IT strategic plans. We have conducted a preliminary needs assessment for a data system to capture violations and enforcement actions. We also agreed to cooperate on International Trade Data Systems (ITDS) issues.

Resources: We established a timeline for developing transparent financial management plans and convened group for developing the risk-based staffing model. We also agreed to a timeline for improving the canine program by deploying more teams based on agreed upon staffing model; ensuring canine teams are fully proficient and trained; and establishing and implementing canine facility standards.

Training: We established a Joint Training Work Group and developed task list for developing and delivering a sustained agriculture-related training program for all CBP officers, supervisors, and management.

Regulatory Enforcement: We reconvened the joint Civil Penalties Action Team (CPAT) and developed a draft charter to permanently establish the group as the joint planning group for regulatory enforcement issues. CPAT held a meeting in September to complete an already initiated review of the existing civil penalty guidelines, develop a preliminary needs assessment for data collection, address issues around prioritizing cases for adjudication, define training needs for the revised guidelines, and develop quality assurance efforts to be incorporated into the Joint Quality Assurance Program (JQAP).

Pest Identification: PPQ is developing position description for two (possibly more) liaison pest identifier positions to provide training and discard authorities to CBP agricultural specialists. We also developed a timeline for implementing performance measures for pest interception, reducing identification backlogs, and expediting the movement of pest samples

In addition to the progress made on the joint action plans, the Task Force evaluated the recently released report of the House Agriculture Committee's investigator to ensure that the Task Force recommendations address any concerns raised in that report. The Task Force concluded that most of the issues raised in the House report are addressed by the action plan. There were a few issues that are not addressed within the action plans and that are operational in nature. CBP and PPQ are working on addressing those issues outside the scope of the action plans.

An important initiative that is not covered by an action plan, but that is associated with the work of the Task Force and will, indeed, measure the ultimate success of the Task Force's work is the JQAP. The JQAP group met in August to evaluate the effectiveness of the quality assurance effort and identify needed improvements. As a result of that meeting, PPQ and CBP have agreed that no report will be released until there is consensus on the recommendations in the report, come to agreement on how to reach that consensus, and agreed to follow-up reviews to evaluate progress with implementing recommendations.

There has been significant progress since the Task Force first convened in May and it is anticipated that the rapid pace of advancement will continue. This group has proven to be an effective communication tool both internally and externally. As a result of the positive steps forward, the Joint Agency Task Force will remain intact as a permanent entity through an agreement between Dr. Richard Dunkle, Deputy Administrator, PPQ and Mr. Thomas Winkowski, Assistant Commissioner, CBP OFO.