

# Safeguarding Implementation Action Plan

**Date:** May 7, 2004

**Issue Group:** Organizational Dynamics

**Activity:** Organizational Structure & Function – Cross Utilization

## **Principles/Recommendations Covered:**

**Principle 2b** - *In order to prevent the incursion of foreign animal diseases into the U.S., the trade environment for animals and animal products must include a flexible, fast-responding, integrated effort with the participation of federal/state agencies and industry.*

**Recommendation #28** *Animal Health Program headquarters should make more frequent staff visits to the field; or relocate staff closer to front line operations.*

**Principle 4i** – *Visionary and sustained leadership should be fostered to encourage new initiatives. These initiatives should expand the APHIS role in activities such as food safety, bioterrorism prevention, and regulatory and emergency response.*

**Recommendation #144** *Encourage routine visits to the field in order to observe needs and opportunities for program enhancement. Relocate key positions traditionally maintained at national headquarters to be closer to field operations; this to improve response efforts and attract talented individuals who may not wish to relocate to Washington D.C. Actively work with partners to clarify and solidify working relationships. Identify new areas of cooperation, defining roles within them.*

**Issue Group Findings:** Despite efforts to move forward, VS has had difficulty transforming its mission/culture from a traditional disease eradication role to one of safeguarding the nation's animal health and facilitating trade. VS has traditionally been self-contained and very focused, but for years has faced declining resources, increased demands on personnel, globalization and changes in customer base. Faced with these new challenges, there is a need to work better with others, delegate when possible, and communicate constantly. Unfortunately, tendencies to express stereotypical viewpoints, and a lack of understanding of the mission-critical work accomplished by others have resulted in an "us and them" mentality within VS. Further, with changes to APHIS and creation of the Department of Homeland Security, the need is arising for field-to-field understanding of other APHIS units.

The APHIS Front Line Survey completed in 2003 indicates communication is an issue for many, and that "internal support (staffs working together) and customer or regulated party cooperation may be some of the keys to success." Internal communication was noted as a common theme, as was "difficulty and uncertainty in relying on partnerships, intra and inter agency cooperation".

To overcome these challenges, VS employees must have a broader understanding of the work being accomplished at levels other than their own. Communication skills are important at every level. Realizing not all field employees might have an interest in relocating to headquarters, there

is still a need for these employees to understand the political aspects of budget creation, policy formation, and support processes. Likewise, all VS employees need to recognize the challenges faced in the field when implementing program policy. This action plan seeks to further develop and enhance effective working relationships among all VS staff.

There have been some recent successful examples of employees filling in when positions are vacant or an employee is on military leave. VS effectively uses acting AVIC details to enhance training opportunities and develop the next generation of leaders. The use of temporary duty assignments has also been used extensively in leadership training programs. This action plan proposes to make this activity a routine event, a part of normal career development.

**Proposed Actions:** The initial recommendations addressed the need for headquarters staff to have a better understanding of field activity, but it is clear this proposal should be broader. Therefore, this plan proposes that an organized system of one-week to 30-day temporary duty assignments be established that will place field employees in major centers of operation such as the Western and Eastern Regional offices, EP, NAHPS, MSS, NVSL, CVB or CEAH and take employees from these major centers of operation and place them in the field or in other major centers of operation. This proposal includes all VS units and employees in all series and grades. Managers should look at these opportunities as a part of career development for their employees and take an active role in identifying and encouraging individuals and/or situations that would benefit from a specific assignment. Note the intent is not for temporary duty employees to shadow anyone, but rather to immerse personnel in the activities of the unit to which they are assigned. For example, an area office employee might want to know more about the MSS budget allocation process. A regional office employee might want to get experience writing a briefing paper or a proposed rule. If a particular AVIC or clerk seems to be at odds with someone at another center of operation, they should be encouraged to walk in the other's shoes for a little bit.

Specifically:

- ✓ The heads of all major centers of operation (Western and Eastern Regional offices, EP, NAHPS, MSS, NVSL, CVB or CEAH) must nominate at least two employees every six months to participate in a one-week to 30-day temporary duty assignment (minimum of 32 employees per year)
- ✓ Each head of a major center of operation will ensure that specific objectives for each temporary duty assignment are identified prior to the start of the temporary duty assignment, and
- ✓ A report is due from the employee participating in the temporary duty assignment to the head of their major center of operation within six weeks of completing the temporary duty assignment.

### **Implementation Plan:**

#### **Tasks:**

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| June 2004 | - VSMT makes a decision  |
| July 2004 | - Begin implementing plan by communicating with VS managers and employees. VSMT sets aside funds in FY05 budget. |

- Oct. 04 - March 05 - Nominate employees for duty assignments, identify objectives, set dates for assignment, send employees on assignment
- April - Oct. 05 - Nominate employees for duty assignments, identify objectives, set dates for assignment, send employees on assignment
- Oct. 2005 - VSMT ensures that the program's first year is reviewed

**Accountable Group:** Implementation will be the ultimate responsibility of the VSMT members in charge of each major center of operation. The Organizational Structure & Function subgroup of the Issue Group will be available during the first year of action to provide input to necessary changes, and to provide feedback.

**Other Key Players:** VS Managers (CEAH Center leaders, NVSL section leaders, AVICs, etc.), Management Support Staff for fiscal considerations.

**Resources Needed:** Resource needs will vary depending on travel and per diem costs and \$64,000 has been estimated for a yearly expenditure. However, it is clear there will be a need to consider these assignments when proposing budgets for out-years and in some cases for managers to set aside monies for travel near the end of fiscal years. Money could be allocated to major centers of operation or held centrally and administered by MSS.

**Statutory/Regulatory Impacts:** None

**Political Sensitivities:** None, but there might be a perception that this proposal applies only to management or to technical professionals when the intent is for it to cross cut the entire organization. Further, the major centers of operation do not have an equal number of employees, so there could be a perception that this Action will unfairly burden some units. The Issue Group leaves the ultimate decision as to how to allocate the opportunities to the VSMT as a whole.

**Sequencing:** VS occasionally participates in major response activities. Every effort should be made to see scheduled details under this plan as a priority, but it is understood they may have to be rescheduled.

**Partnering/Cooperation/Communication:** The main intent of this action plan is to improve communication, understanding, and partnering among VS personnel. However, the Issue Group also sees this as a potential avenue for improved communication within APHIS.

**Expected Outcome and Performance Indicators:** While it will take years, successful implementation of this plan will result in culture change within VS such that clear lines of authority and responsibility between major centers of operation is achieved, communication is more efficient, and temporary duty assignments are a normal part of career development. Employees will better understand the scope of the VS organization and therefore will be in a better position to delegate and gain feedback. Outside stakeholders should begin to see VS as a more fluid organization.

**Linkage to the VS Strategic Plan:** This action plan supports Goal 5 of the Strategic plan: *Create an organizational environment that fosters VS' ability to carry out its animal health mission.*