

Labor-Management Forum

United States Department of Agriculture

August 5, 2010

On December 9, 2009, President Obama issued Executive Order 13522 Creating Labor-Management Forums to Improve the Delivery of Government Services. The purpose of the Executive Order is to establish a cooperative and productive form of labor-management relations throughout the executive branch. In achieving this goal, the Executive Order seeks to turn the relationship between the Federal Government and labor unions representing its employees away from confrontation and toward cooperation and collaboration. It is the President's belief that a collaborative labor-management relationship will result in an improvement in the government's ability to deliver high quality services to the American public. The improvement of government services is the chief objective of the Executive Order. To support this outcome, the Executive Order seeks to institutionalize processes that allow employees to contribute their ideas to making the government work better. The Executive Order directs Federal departments, such as the USDA, to establish Labor-Management Forums with their unions at the Department level and down to the level in agencies where unions have been voted in to represent employees. The Executive Order also allows the use of existing labor management committees to do the work of Forums. The Forums are to be used as a method for unions and USDA management to discuss initiatives and potential changes before a decision is made to implement any initiative or make changes. This process is called pre-decisional input. In this manner, management would benefit by obtaining ideas of the people who would be expected to make the change happen and, thereby, improve the quality of changes.

Secretary Vilsack has been a strong proponent of the collaborative approach to labor-management relations. Even before the Executive Order was issued, Secretary Vilsack called for a meeting between USDA leadership and the national unions who represented USDA employees. The unions were asked for their ideas on making USDA a better place to work. Several of their suggestions, such as changing the name of the Department's personnel function from what they felt was the degrading title of Human "Capital" to Human "Resources", were adopted immediately. Since the signing of the Executive Order, Secretary Vilsack has continued to engage employees' union representatives in his effort to make USDA a better place to work. As part of his Cultural Transformation initiative, he instructed organizers of the listening sessions to seek out the opinions of labor unions. This resulted in unions being guaranteed participation in the six sessions held around the country as well as a seventh union-only listening session in Washington, DC. More recently, and in response to the latest Employee Viewpoint Survey, the Secretary had his Deputy Chief of Staff, Carole Jett, meet with union leaders and ask for their ideas on how employee morale could be improved.

At the direction of Secretary Vilsack, the USDA has been on the fast track to implement the Executive Order throughout the Department. The Executive Order created the National Council on Federal Labor-Management Relations (Council). The Council is a Presidential advisory body composed of representatives of Federal employee organizations, Federal management organizations and senior government officials. It is co-chaired by the Director of the Office of Personnel Management and the Deputy Director of the Office of

Management and Budget An important part of the mission of the Council is to oversee the implementation of the Executive Order nationwide.

The Executive Order required that Federal executive departments each submit a plan to implement their responsibilities under the Order to the Council by March 9, 2010. After consulting with its national labor unions, USDA submitted its implementation plan on March 9, 2010. The Council notified USDA that its implementation plan was approved in April. USDA's plan was part of the very first group of plans approved by the Council.

In May, USDA convened a meeting with its unions to discuss the best way to carry out the requirements of the approved implementation plan. The parties appointed two committees. One was responsible for drafting a charter for USDA's Department level Forum. The other committee was tasked with developing a plan that would determine, as required by the Executive Order, how the baseline for the labor-management relations climate in the Department would be established.

The parties met again in June at which time the Charter was approved to formally establish the USDA Labor-Management Forum. The parties also approved a plan to assess the labor-management climate. Other organizational issues were decided, such as which of the co-chairs (labor or management) would take the first turn presiding at Forum meetings. Using a coin flip, Labor won the first six-month period of presiding at Forum meetings. An important consensus reached at this meeting was that Mission Areas, agencies, and staff offices should be given the "green light" to fulfill their implementation obligations. Karen Messmore, Director, Office of Human Resources Management subsequently issued an instruction to all agency heads that they should begin implementing the Executive order at the various levels within their organizations.

The Department level Forum is responsible for implementing the Executive Order by delivering the highest quality services to the American people, improving the quality of work life for USDA employees, and promoting good labor-management relations throughout USDA. It will work to ensure that Mission Areas, agencies, and staff offices are in compliance with the Executive Order and develop guidance and otherwise provide assistance to labor management groups at Mission Area, agencies, and staff office levels. The USDA Forum will also engage unions at the national level in pre-decisional input for Department-wide initiatives.

At the Forum's July meeting, unions were engaged in the pre-decisional process on a number of issues including: 1) Improvements to the Departmental Regulation on telework; 2) Developing a comprehensive standardized process for onboarding new employees; 3) Updating the Departmental Regulation on Individual Development Plans (IDPs); and 4) Revising the Departmental Regulation on labor relations. Forum members discussed a wide range of other issues, such as a new regulation to implement Executive Order 13513 that requires agencies to prohibit text messaging while driving,; the Department's desire to standardize human resource tools and processes across all agencies; the status of the Cultural Transformation initiative; and problems with details both within and between agencies.

Forum members also took up the matter of communicating with employees so that they were aware of the Forum initiative and activities at USDA. This introduction is our first effort in this regard. It will be followed by more.

The next USDA Forum meeting is scheduled for August 25 at which time the Mission Areas will report on their progress in implementing the Executive Order in agencies and offices.

In the short time since USDA's implementation plan was approved by the National Council, labor and management have acted quickly to make the requirements of the Executive Order a reality. Although we have made a good start, there is much more to be done to fully transform the labor-management environment in USDA. However, with the high level of commitment demonstrated by national leaders, both in unions and USDA management, we are confident that employees and the American public will soon begin seeing the benefits of cooperation and collaboration between USDA management and the unions that represent its workforce.

Sincerely,



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President, Local 3870, RD,
American Federation of State, County
& Municipal Employees



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