



USDA to permanently shutter 259 offices in budget shift

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) must be built to meet the evolving needs of a 21st century agricultural economy, Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack said in presenting USDA's [Blueprint for Stronger Service](#), a plan aimed at streamlining operations and cutting costs. The USDA will close 259 domestic offices, facilities and labs across the country, as well as seven foreign offices. The Blueprint is based on a department-wide review of operations conducted as part of the Obama Administration's Campaign to Cut Waste, aimed at making government work better and more efficiently. When fully implemented, these actions along with other recommended changes will provide efficiencies valued at about \$150 million annually, and eventually more based on future realignment of the workforce. For more information, you can visit www.usda.gov/strongerservice.

American Farm Bureau Federation Carves Path Forward on Farm Bill

After months of trying to get the nation's largest and most diverse general farm organization firmly aligned behind a set of farm policy principles, American Farm Bureau Federation President Bob Stallman finally got the "clear direction" he asked delegates to deliver during their annual meeting in Honolulu this month. Whether or not the organization's proposals will now gain traction on Capitol Hill, where most bets are still 50-50 that a farm bill will even be completed this year, remains to be seen.

Vilsack Outlines Vital Points for Next Farm Bill

Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack delivered a clear message to farmers and ranchers attending the American Farm Bureau Federation's 93rd Annual Meeting. "Agriculture and rural America matter, and no group understands that better than the men and women who lead Farm Bureau," Vilsack said. Vilsack also had high praise for agriculture as being responsible for one in every twelve jobs in America, and focused on the need to address challenges facing the United States and the world. Last year, American agricultural exports amounted to \$137.4 billion, which led to a \$42 billion farm trade surplus, and direct support for more than 1 million American jobs, according to Vilsack. The secretary pledged to Farm Bureau members that USDA would continue to listen to their concerns and would work with other federal departments and agencies on regulatory issues with potential impacts on rural America, including dust and youth labor rules.

GRANT Act Stirs Controversy

Legislation is pending in the congress that would require the public release of sensitive information regarding peer review of federal grants. As it is currently drafted, the Grant Reform and New Transparency (GRANT) Act, HR 3433, would require that the government publish online grant proposals funded by federal agencies. Unlike the current government practice of releasing abstracts, this new requirement would include potentially proprietary intellectual information related to the applicant's hypotheses, methodology, and preliminary research findings. In addition, the GRANT Act would require the public disclosure of the names of the peer reviewers for each federally funded grant.

Critics contend that removing the anonymity of peer review would open the process to real or perceived fear of repercussions for reviewers, and could result in self-censoring by reviewers. ASABE staff is monitoring this legislation closely, and encourages feedback from members. If you would like to voice an opinion on the GRANT Act, please contact Sean Gallagher via [email](#) or phone 202/496-9660.

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