




DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20250

JAN 22 2009

TO: Acting Under and Assistant Secretaries
Agency Heads
Acting Agency Heads
Acting CFO, CIO
Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary for Administration

FROM: Secretary Tom Vilsack 

SUBJECT: Interim Procedures

In the coming weeks and months, I look forward to getting to know you, working with you, and continuing to learn about the work of the Department of Agriculture. It is a great honor to be nominated and confirmed to lead such a strong organization with such broad reach.

Over the next couple weeks, I will be working carefully but quickly to build a team of diligent, competent, and inclusive leaders to complement the excellent career staff already in place. Already, I've had the opportunity to meet some of you, and I've been impressed with the professionalism, kindness, and generosity I've observed.

During this interim period, things are going to be happening quickly and I am depending on your leadership and expertise to guide me and this Department into the next stage of its history. In the process, I ask that you help educate me about the day to day operations of the Department.

For what will hopefully be a brief interim period preceding the confirmation of a subcabinet and the placement of other key officials, I would like you to notify the Office of the Secretary (OSEC) in advance of certain actions and decisions and to provide my office with the opportunity to review such matters.

In addition, I ask that in the next several days, each Acting official provide me with a brief memo proposing a work plan for how you think your agency or component should consult with and interact with OSEC during this interim period. Hopefully, this exercise will assist me in better targeting the matters that I should be involved in and know about during this interim period, and we can quickly suspend the broader information and consultation requests listed below.

Employee Selections/Reassignments

As I mentioned above, during this interim period, I will be assembling a team of professionals to help run the Department. At the same time, I will be involved in discussions involving hiring and organizational structure throughout the Department to improve my understanding of these decisions and to ensure that hiring and organizational decisions reflect my goals for the Department.

To that end, all final decisions relating to hiring, with certain exceptions, shall be temporarily routed to OSEC for review before tendering offers. Job offers formally extended and accepted before January 21, 2009 will be honored. Please continue processing vacancies up to the point of a job offer, including advertising, rating, ranking, issuing certificates, and interviewing. Personnel actions that implicate “essential Government functions”, such as recruiting and hiring firefighters and meat inspectors, may continue without interruption at this time.

Conferences

Until further notice, please notify the Office of the Secretary as early as possible in advance of all conference and offsite events that have a total cost exceeding \$100,000.

International Negotiations

Until further notice, please notify OSEC as early as possible in advance of major bilateral and multilateral negotiations in which the Department will be participating and significant international conferences at which the Department will have a presence.

Audit Responses

Until further notice, audit responses, statement of action responses, and/or requests for management decisions for Office of Inspector General or Government Accountability Office audit reports must be submitted to the Chief Financial Officer. The OCFO will package and submit the proposed responses on a weekly basis to the Office of the Secretary for review and approval. This step is being taken to ensure that OSEC is engaged in and aware of pending issues being audited by GAO and OIG.

Advisory Committees

Until further notice, no agency official responsible for an advisory committee should appoint a committee member to any topical, regional, state, or local advisory committee. No invitations for nominations to advisory committees shall be published until further notice. If an agency official has selected committee members for an advisory committee, but the letters of invitation

have not been sent, agencies shall suspend sending the letter of invitation. This step is being taken to ensure that advisory committee memberships reflect the goals I will pursue as Secretary.

Announcements of Financial Assistance

Until further notice, all notices of funds availability and announcements regarding awards of grants, loan guarantees, cooperative agreements, loans, and other financial agreements should be routed to the Office of the Secretary at least three days in advance of their publication for review.

Legislative Drafting and Hill Briefings

Until further notice, all legislative drafting technical assistance and plans to brief Members of Congress and their staff should be routed in advance to the Office of the Secretary for review. This includes requests for drafting assistance for the pending stimulus package.

Ongoing Litigation

Until further notice, significant Department decisions related to ongoing litigation should be routed to the Office of the Secretary for review. Decisions to concur with Department of Justice recommendations, litigation settlement, and major strategy decisions of a dispositive nature, in both administrative and civil actions, particularly in the areas of personnel, civil rights, EEO, substantive program policy matters, and tort and contract matters in excess of \$500,000 should be provided in advance to the Office of the Secretary for review.

Press/Communications

In order for the Department to deliver unified, consistent messages, it's important for the Office of the Secretary to be consulted on media inquiries and proposed responses to questions related to legislation, budgets, hot-button policy issues, and regulations. Policy-related statements should not be made to the press without notifying and consulting the Office of the Secretary. This includes press releases and on and off the record conversations.

All policy-related content for website updates should also be routed to the Office of the Secretary before it is added to the website.

Correspondence

Until further notice, all correspondence between the Department and the Office of Management and Budget and all Congressional Offices must be prepared for the Secretary's signature and be cleared through the Office of Budget and Program Analysis, the Office of the General Counsel, the Office of Congressional Relations, and the Secretary's Deputy Chief of Staff.

Inter-agency Agreements

Until further notice, all proposed inter-agency agreements between USDA and other federal agencies and non-federal cooperators should be submitted in advance for review to the Office of the Secretary.

Contract Awards

Until further notice, all proposed contract awards for advisory and assistance services and professional services exceeding a total cost of \$500,000 should be submitted through the Chief Procurement Policy Division to the Deputy Chief of Staff in the Office of the Secretary for review.

Thank You and All Other Issues

I greatly appreciate your patience and understanding during this interim period, as I work to build my team and familiarize myself with the issues you cover on a daily basis.

Your assistance in helping me appreciate the diversity of USDA's activities and responsibilities will be important to my ability to successfully lead this Department. Over the next couple of weeks, if there are issues that you think I should know about, please do not hesitate to visit my office or provide me with briefing memos or decision memos that you think I should review.