

## Ready for Y2K?

Will a farmer be able to call a USDA Service Center and reach a service person on January 3, 2000? Will that person be able to use his or her computer workstation to access the data needed to satisfy that farmer's request? Based on the testing done by USDA's Service Center Implementation Team (SCIT) - LAN/WAN/VOICE project so far, the answer to both questions is yes.

As part of the USDA's Service Center modernization project, the Department is installing new computers and networking equipment in more than 2500 offices nationwide. "When complete, this modernization effort will allow employees from NRCS, FSA, and RD to provide one stop shopping to the public for USDA related business functions," said Greg Carnill, Executive Director of SCIT. "Service Centers will be able to share information among the various agency programs by using business quality e-mail and internet access." New applications are also being developed to save time and money as older business processes are being re-engineered.

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Staff from the three partner agencies and the Service Center Implementation Team, along with USDA's Chief Information Officer watch as Dave Green, IBMs Test Director, demonstrates LAN/WAN/VOICE Y2K testing in IBM's Gaithersburg, Maryland laboratory.

## Idaho USDA Service Center Convergence Works Well

On March 1, 1998, seven USDA agencies moved into a new General Services Agency building in Boise, Idaho: three Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service offices—Veterinary Service, Wildlife Services, and Plant Protection and Quarantine—Food and Nutrition Service, Rural Development, Natural Resource Conservation Service, and Farm Service Agency.

The USDA Service Center agencies—FSA, RD, and NRCS—planned the space to converge the administrative and technology staffs. The mailroom, break room, forms and storage areas are all combined. Conference rooms are located adjacent to each other near the front entrance, an arrangement that minimizes disruption of staff while the rooms are in use and allows breakout rooms for large

workshop-type meetings. All seven agencies use the FSA print room.

At first, personnel were concerned that the range of different agency cultures would make co-location difficult. But organization of a committee with authority to make decisions for each agency plus constant communication, virtually eliminated

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# A Brief History of the Inter-Operability Lab

The USDA Service Center Initiative's Inter-Operability Lab was set up to help protect the field from errors arising from business process reengineering activities. Initially housed in a supply closet in Riverdale, Maryland, the IOL recreates a USDA Service Center pilot site environment, and runs reengineered computer business applications through stringent inter-operability testing before allowing deployment to the field sites.

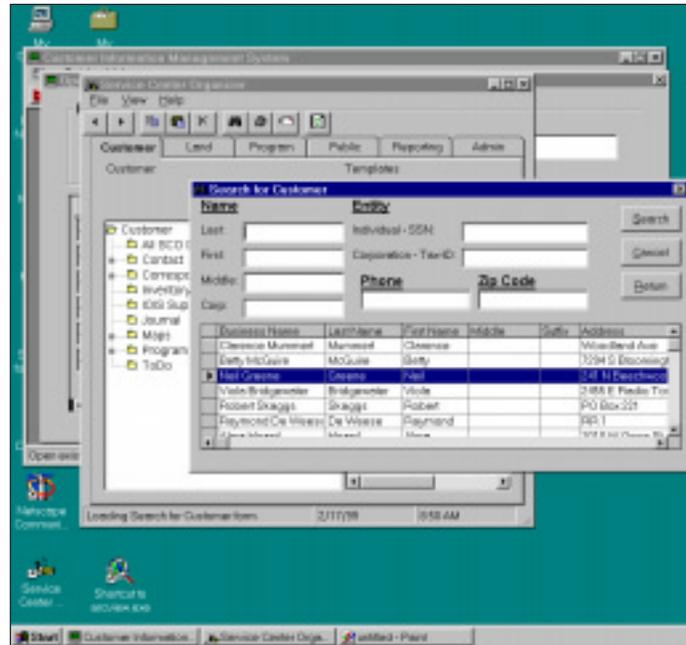
Legacy machines were gathered that mirror the equipment used in USDA Service Centers by the three field service delivery agencies. Included are two FSA A36s, a Rural Development 3B2, and an NRCS globalyst UNIX machine. Even the LAN/WAN/VOICE router and hub configuration was duplicated. In addition to the legacy equipment, a copy of the new common computing environment pilot equipment was installed.

The simulation of the service center environment achieves two main objectives: 1) It allows application conflicts to be identified and corrected in the Lab, before they surface in the field, and 2) It allows the Lab personnel to recreate problems the field encounters and to develop and provide a resolution to the problem.

In August 1998 the Inter-Operability Lab moved, along with the rest of the SCI team, to the Beltsville, Maryland facility. Currently sharing a four thousand square foot lab with three other SCI projects, the Lab hosts each of the reengineered applications before it deploys to the field. Each project

In addition to testing business applications, the IOL is also responsible for:

- Configuration Management and Deployment.
- Security.
- Second-tier help desk support.
- Technical in-house support for users and systems.
- Technical coordination across BPR projects.



*This is a snapshot of one of the BPR projects, the Service Center Organizer. This application provides the Service Centers with a common interface to various applications that are part of the Common Computing Environment. All BPR applications will be built to use this interface.*

team is responsible for ensuring their applications meet user requirements and are error free before deployment to the pilot sites. The role of the Lab is to prevent conflict between projects, and establish cross-project standards.

A computer application can be error free and meet all the project objectives and still be a failure in the field. Applications must operate well with other applications in the same computer environment. The IOL takes a comprehensive view of software architecture and testing; not only does an application have to function properly on its own, it must operate with legacy, developing and future applications.

Testing is conducted in the Inter-Operability Lab after the BPR staff certifies that the application meets user requirements and known errors have been corrected. The IOL uses standard computer software certification guidelines as a basic checklist for inter-operability. In addition, other tests are run to insure that the software will work with the CCE equipment, share data, work well with other software programs, not interfere with other applications working in the same environment.

Inter-operability testing also provides some insurance against stovepipe applications by encouraging an approach that requires sharing of systems and data. Testing of early

applications has coordinated use of a common customer database, prevented overwriting of system files, forced a common disk and data structure, increased security on project databases, and reduced impact of piloting on ongoing Service Center activities.

Additional benefits have been realized by the sharing of lessons learned and tools across the Agencies. Also, the IOL has shown how to build better installation packages, and trained state staff to reduce the time required to support the new computer applications in the field.

Finally, legacy systems must be connected to the new CCE equipment, but also, legacy applications must be tested to learn the impact the old systems will have in the new computer environment.

The objectives of inter-operability testing of legacy applications are: 1) find a method to provide access to the legacy systems from the new environment, and 2) test existing applications for their impact on the new applications in the CCE environment. The method used to conduct these tests is similar to the testing of the new applications. The main difference is that many of the existing or legacy applications were designed for a different operating system and don't run as efficiently as the reengineered programs. ■

# BPR Pilot Site Update

Two years ago, nine USDA Service Centers across the nation were selected to pilot test improvements in six areas of business processes used by USDAs three field service delivery agencies. These sites were selected to provide a good cross section of USDA Service Center operations and functions nationwide.

The initial field testing is intended to demonstrate the benefits of Business Process Reengineering (BPR) projects—benefits USDA recognized it would need to survive declining resources while continuing to provide quality customer service. The pilot sites are: Okeechobee, Florida; Scottsburg, Indiana; Paola, Kansas; Rolla, North Dakota; The Dalles, Oregon; Los Lunas, New Mexico; Snow Hill, Maryland; Abilene, Texas; and Sacramento, California.

Testing the results of business process improvements serves three major needs; prove the benefit of reengineered business processes in an operational setting, validate the estimated resource savings, and field test the compatibility and interoperability of the supporting Common Computing Environment (CCE) technology. Field testing is the final validation in the project development lifecycle before recommendations are made for national implementation.

Since the selection, significant progress has been made at the nine USDA BPR pilot sites. Seven of the nine sites are “live,” and have received and are using the CCE equipment and a common office automation package. Staff at the remaining two pilot sites are getting training and will be operating in the new computing environment and with the reengineered business processes in the near future.

One of the first cross-agency projects being tested is a combined project of The Service Center Organizer (SCO), Integrated Office Information System (IOIS), and Customer Information Management (CIM). Okeechobee and Scottsburg are currently testing the combined project, and it will soon be tested at the Rolla and Paola sites. The IOIS is designed to test the procedures to update, create, store, retrieve and access office and customer information electronically.

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“We expect to field IOIS to every pilot site in the hope that the site will realize immediate time savings from the use of the new technology afforded by CCE,” said Gerald D. Frank, Project Coordinator for Farm and Community Programs. “The CIM database, used to pre-populate forms and letters with information the agencies already has in other places, will increase functionality at each stage of deployment, and SCO is the common user front end to the information that will be shared across agencies.”

During the Conservation Reserve Program Sign-up 18 last fall, FSA and NRCS employees at Scottsburg tested a prototype CRP application. An automated AD-1026/CRP application form was used to reduce the time spent determining producer eligibility and processing paperwork. The application used digital maps of the Geographic Information Systems (GIS), calculated acreage and inventories soils data, as well as automated calculation of the CRP-3 form and populates the CRP-2 form with information already in the system.

The result was beneficial to both the Service Center and the producer. “We are able to make more effective use of the time the producer spends in the office, and in some cases we are able to reduce the numbers of trips they need to make,” Scottsburg County Executive Director Bob Backus said. “We invited producers to sit at the computer with us while we used the GIS tools to review their digital maps and determine soil type and slope. We used the project software to select those fields that had the highest erodibility index and eliminate those that had less erodible slopes. In addition, the software allowed us to quickly and effectively help the producer determine rental rates with the automated CRP-2 form. The new process allows producers tender an eligible offer on the initial visit, and saves them the multiple trips made when CRP applications were taken the old way.”

In the Resource Inventory and Assessment (RIA) business arena, GIS will enable numerous projects and support projects in other business areas such as CRP. Two of the seven projects underway in RIA are the Common Land Unit and GIS Training projects. The CLU team worked with all the pilot sites to ready their photography for digitizing, and has led the effort to establish 12 CLU digitizing centers across the U.S. The GIS Training Team developed a customized cross-agency training course that addresses practical business applications supported by GIS.

The Customer Service Toolkit (CST) project uses commercial software, customized to support service center business functions. Toolkit will allow USDA to offer their customers quality map products, conservation plans and other documentation, through a remote computing environment. A desktop GIS software package has been customized with 20 tools to view GPS coordinates, calculate and update acres, and access various data themes to plan practices, view maps, enter attributes, record determinations and make analyses.

BPR pilot sites maintain multiple on-going projects while balancing daily workload: no easy task considering the impact of the ongoing farm crisis and last year’s disaster legislation. “The sites are operating in a complex environment,” said Shirley Hall, Pilot Site Coordinator. “It’s imperative that the staffs are flexible and adaptable while taking direction and redirection from project teams. The people staffing pilot sites have done a great job maintaining their enthusiasm and dedication during the initial transition to a pilot site and testing period. They’ve really been great troopers.” ■

**Submit stories to:**

Editor, *Service Center News*,  
USDA, National FAC  
Stop 0199, Room 4416-S  
Washington, DC 20250-0199  
Phone: (202) 720-5238  
FAX: (202) 720-6101

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At the heart of this project is the networking foundation or infrastructure. In each office this consists of new phones, phone cabling, routers, hubs, modems, e-mail and internet software, and cabling for new computer workstations. The team that designed and runs the operations is made up of representatives from each of the 3 partner agencies and several outside contractors. The base wiring has been installed in over 2000 offices with completion of all service centers expected later this year.

With all this activity, the answer to the question how can we be assured that USDA's Service Centers will function properly on Monday, January 3, 2000, the first business day of the new year, can be found in the testing.

"The only way to ensure systems function properly in the Year 2000 is to perform end-to-end tests on the systems," said Anne Reed, USDA

Chief Information Officer. "We need to analyze all of our mission critical systems, fix code and equipment where required, test the systems and develop contingency plans to address the unexpected."

The LAN/WAN/VOICE team recently completed its test of the equipment it is installing in the Service Centers with help from IBM's Year 2000 Testing Services Center in Gaithersburg, Maryland. The team ran tests on all of the major equipment that is being deployed. "Only minor errors were found in USDA's LAN/WAN/VOICE system," said Tom Brandt, IBM's Year 2000 Project Manager. "The system should pass into the Year 2000 with no major issues."

Members of the LAN/WAN/VOICE team along with Anne Reed, Chief Information Officer, Greg Carnill, and representatives from FSA

and RD visited the IBM test center and saw first hand how tests were run. The phone and computer systems are installed in a controlled environment and special hardware is set up to act as human users, simulating keystrokes and mouse movements. Forward date testing is performed on numerous system configurations. In one example, dates and clocks on all of the individual system components are set to 11:45 p.m. on December 31, 1999. After 15 minutes the system enters the new year and all of the parts are checked to see that all are performing accurately.

Based on new equipment, wiring, software, the efforts of the LAN/WAN/VOICE, and extensive testing, the answer to the question whether LAN/WAN/VOICE in USDA Service Centers will be ready for January 3, 2000 is yes. ■

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any serious problems. Meeting weekly for over a year before the move, committee members learned from each other and were able to anticipate potential problems and implement solutions before problems became disruptive. The spirit of cooperation was simply amazing.

The move required some logistical adjustments. APHIS moved from three different locations in two cities, including one 120 miles from Boise. The three Service Center agencies reduced space from 33,500 square feet to 26,000 square feet while retaining the same number of staff. New modular furniture, purchased with savings from rental fees, is helping staff live with the new limited space. Mailroom operations also required an adjustment because of different mail schedules and methods of internal distribution.

While the administrative staffs are still agency specific in duties and procedures, working together in co-located space has its rewards. In Human Resources and Management Services, agency policies are similar enough that staffs now have counterparts to share and discuss problems with. Out of these discussions come

new solutions and ways of performing tasks. Co-location has resulted in staffs learning about each agency's specific needs and cultures. Periodic joint staff meetings keep all administrative personnel informed of common issues. Administrative leadership works together on a daily basis, which has been especially important in resolving time-sensitive space issues.

Because of working together, sharing common issues, and learning more about each other, administrative staffs are much more confident about the future when administrative convergence is fully implemented. ■



### National FAC Executive Officer:

Gregory L. Carnill

### Director, Service Center Operations:

Pandor H. Hadjy

### Mail or fax questions or comments to:

Editor, *Service Center News*,  
USDA, National FAC  
Stop 0199, Room 4416-S  
Washington, DC 20250-0199  
Phone: (202) 720-5238  
FAX: (202) 720-6101

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