

NEWS

The FSA Website: Our 24-Hour Employee

Many devoted FSA employees put in long days, often toiling far past their scheduled work hours. But there's one FSA entity that remains on duty even after the last office door is locked for the evening. And it doesn't even need a pot of coffee to stay awake! That entity is our 24-hour Agency website (www.fsa.usda.gov).

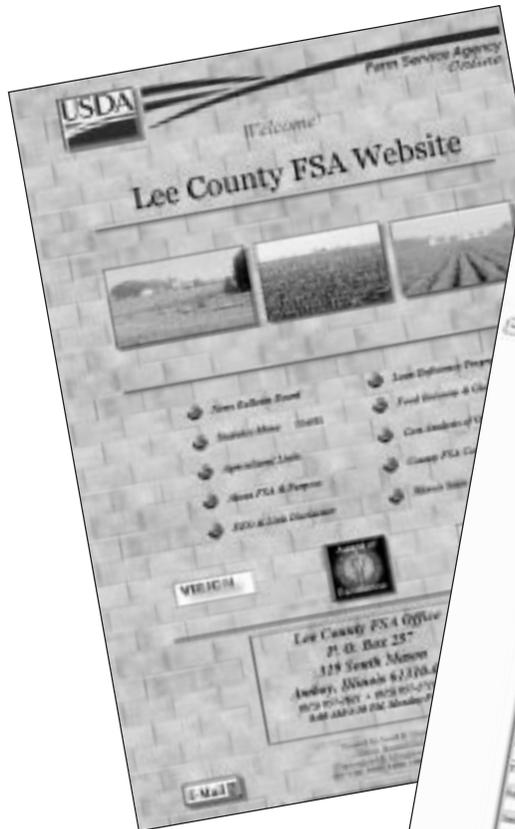
Since its inception in 1996 from a small webpage collection that provided basic Agency information and news releases, our electronic coworker has mushroomed into a vast "web" of information and services. This is crucial, as more and more farmers are discovering the necessity of computers and the Internet. In fact, from 1997 to 1999, the percentage of farmers nationwide with access to the Internet more than doubled from just 13 percent to 28 percent, according to USDA's National Agricultural Statistics Service. For many farmers, computers are becoming a primary source for sharing and gathering information and even for purchasing products.

FSA is listening and responding to the demand. Our website expands and improves daily to satisfy our growing number of online customers. In 1999, an average of 144,000 users visited our website each month; 104,000 of these were users other than FSA employees. From Washington, D.C. to the

Oregon State Office to the Jasper County Office in Iowa, FSA's web content providers keep our site up to date with national and local FSA news, program information in several languages, loan and market rates, and office contacts. "Also through our

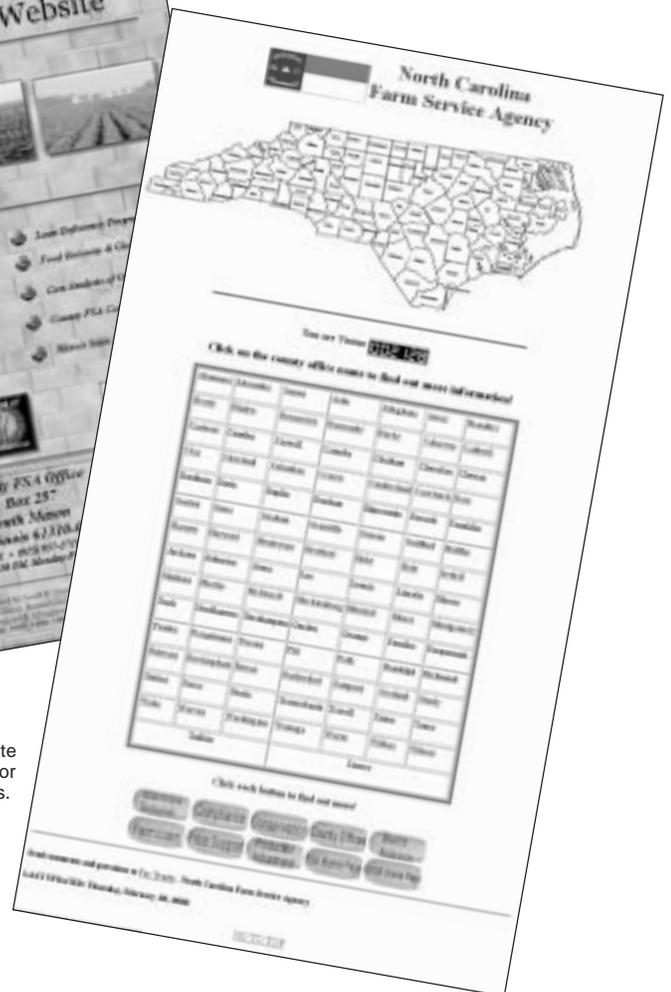
website, anyone can sign up to automatically receive news releases by email," says Dann Stuart, Head of Public Affairs Branch's Communication Services Section. "We currently have about 4,000 subscribers, and this

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Lee County, Ill. was FSA's first county office site.

The North Carolina State Office has a webpage for each of its 100 counties.



ADMINISTRATOR'S COLUMN

What an Integrated Web We'll Weave

Before farmer Jones hits the fields this morning, he hits the Internet. Sitting before his computer, he checks the FSA loan rates in his county, then completes the initial paperwork online to apply for an FSA operating farm loan. That same morning, FSA service center employee Stevens flips on her computer, and when Jones' application pops up on her screen, she begins processing his application online.

This isn't a pipe dream; it soon will be reality. FSA and its service center partners — NRCS and RD — are developing the capability to deliver selected services over the web. This project, called the Electronic Access Initiative (EAI), will make use of the web a mainstream way of doing business for USDA service center agencies.

We are making this technological leap into electronic access for several reasons. First, a multitude of Congressional mandates, Executive Orders, and legislation requires the Federal Government to build the technical infrastructure for online service delivery. Just as important, our more technologically savvy customers expect this change — and we've heard from more than one. As Internet usage

expands among farmers, demand for online interaction and simplified, standardized ways to access web-based Agency services is increasing.

To respond to this growing need, a team of FSA, NRCS, and RD staff from Washington, D.C., Kansas City, Mo., Fort Collins, Colo., and St. Louis, Mo. is building a common infrastructure to integrate web services and information provided to the customers, employees, and partners of the USDA service center agencies. In fact, the team has many of the technical aspects for the system already in place.

Electronic access will help us streamline our business processes and make our Agency's website more efficient, user-friendly, and navigable. EAI will offer many advantages for our customers, including secure and private electronic forms submission, decreased need to travel to USDA facilities, and increased opportunities for feedback. And employees will benefit as well, with such online advancements as self-service human resources transactions, online training, and electronic procurement.

EAI also moves us in the direction of providing information and services by category, rather than by agency, which means a more seamless web for users. Our customers, for instance, will only have to go through a single search routine to find matching information from all three agencies on conservation, disaster assistance, or any other service. Organizing data in this manner will make it easier for the public to find the information it seeks. EAI will enhance our identity as a service center partner without losing our identity as an agency. Sharing data through an integrated website will also improve communication across agency lines.

To integrate electronic services with our traditional service delivery methods in a way that best meets the needs of all our customers and employees, I'm depending on your input.

The EAI team has put together a website to explain in detail how EAI will work for us. I strongly encourage you to visit the website at www.info.usda.gov/eai and tell us what you think by clicking on the *feedback* link. Your feedback, along with responses to the recent EAI survey, will help us plan and design electronic services.

Our service center employees already provide the best possible one-to-one customer service and know what our customers expect. We need to apply our know-how to web-based transactions for services that do not require extensive face-to-face interaction between customers and service center staff. Help us identify the user-friendly tools — software, screen interfaces, file sharing utilities, etc. — that will encourage customers to use the web-based alternative. We also need to figure out the best way for service center employees to receive online information from customers.

These changes will not occur overnight, but the EAI team, with the assistance of the FSA Webmaster and program specialists around the country, plans to make secure and private transactions available online by the end of this fiscal year. I will keep you up to date as we progress.

As a service center partner, I'm excited by the prospects EAI brings to our Agency, as well as to our customers and employees. I know it will take some time for employees to adjust to providing services online, as service center staffs are accustomed to the traditional method of face-to-face customer service delivery. But I assure you it's worth it. Over time, EAI will make our jobs easier, our Agency more efficient and responsive, and help us more effectively carry out our mission.



FSA NEWS

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New Ideas in Farm Policy

by USDA Secretary Dan Glickman

The Clinton Administration, as part of its new proposed budget, has put forward some new ideas to shore up the farm safety net and help farmers beyond what is provided by existing programs.

The 1996 Farm Bill brought dramatic changes to this Nation's farm programs, including some sound provisions like a greater emphasis on conservation and more planting flexibility. But in overhauling 60 years of national farm policy, Congress left behind an inadequate safety net, putting farmers at risk and giving them little to fall back on.

Then, over the last two years, and now going on a third, farmers have been coping with plunging commodity prices, natural disasters, and a worldwide glut in production.

Rather than waiting to throw together yet another hasty and expensive emergency relief package later this year, we have instead decided to offer some new ideas, which can lay the groundwork for new farm legislation in 2002. But let me be clear: for now, we are not proposing to rewrite the current Farm Bill — we want to enhance it.

Our plan calls for \$11 billion in new investments over the next two years to build a broader-based farm policy, one that is more national in scope, includes more farmers and ranchers, is targeted to actual production, helps those most with the greatest need, and treats our natural resources as valuable commodities.

The proposal has four major components.

First, it includes income support that is targeted and countercyclical. Payments would kick in when incomes drop, and they would go to farmers — not landlords — who are hardest hit. All but 2 percent of current Agricultural Market Transition Act participants would be eligible for these payments, which would be in addition to existing AMTA and loan rate payment programs, up to a payment limit.

We are also proposing extension of the dairy price support program through the life of the current farm bill, as well as a freeze on loan rates for wheat, corn, soybeans, rice, and cotton for the 2000 crop. And we are instituting a new, on-farm storage program to give farmers greater marketing flexibility.

Second, the proposal offers increased conservation assistance, including a program that would provide payments to farmers who undertake practices that help curb erosion and protect water supplies from pesticide and nutrient runoff. This Conservation Security Program would extend eligibility for conservation payments to more farmers, in more areas, growing more crops. In addition to this new effort, we're also proposing an expansion of current conservation programs.

Third, the budget includes more risk management tools. We would extend the premium discount on crop insurance and give farmers the option to buy multi-year coverage, just as any other business can. We're also proposing a pilot livestock insurance program, and we want to make it easier for farmers of non-insured crops to get the help they need when disaster strikes.

Fourth, we want to help farmers find new markets and get a larger share of each consumer dollar spent on food. So we are proposing \$130 million to help develop farm cooperatives and help livestock co-ops build processing facilities. A proposed \$150 million investment would encourage the conversion of more agricultural goods into renewable energy sources. And for the third year in a row, we are also asking for the flexibility to redirect unused export enhancement funds into trade-supporting initiatives like the Market Access Program and international food aid efforts.

Taken together, I believe these ideas and proposals — on top of the many things we are already doing — are a strong foundation for a new farm safety net, which would fit within the



context of a fiscally responsible balanced budget.

Arriving at these ideas was not easy. In fact, it was very difficult, and some of the details remain quite complex. But what we are doing is setting the stage for a meaningful dialogue, the end of which will be a farm policy that farmers can count on, in good times and in bad.

NATIONAL AGRICULTURE WEEK IS MARCH 19-25

Sponsored by the Agriculture Council of America, this week honors the 2 million American farmers, who each grew enough food on average to feed nearly 130 people here and abroad. The entire food and fiber sector — including production agriculture, transportation, and processing — accounts for 13 percent of our Nation's economic worth. By itself, production agriculture (farming) contributes about \$60 billion towards the Nation's gross domestic product.

WEBSITE

continued from first page

number increases practically every day.”

All this sophisticated technology would not reach past the content providers' computers without Kansas City Management Office's (KCMO) Telecommunications Division. This dedicated team works around the clock to provide the lifeline for our site. The team oversees our webfarm — the centralized host for all individual FSA webpages and database applications across the Nation. With this webfarm, FSA is unique among USDA agencies. Other agencies have webservers at the state and county levels, which adds additional security risks and content coordination problems. KCMO protects our website with the most advanced security methods.

With KCMO's tireless support, our FSA Webmaster Jeff Kerby and over 100 national, state, and county web content providers keep our website up to snuff with the most current Agency information. About 20 of these employees work in the National Office and update program information based on mission area, such as conservation, price support, and farm loans. “Most of our content providers across the country have other job duties as well,” Kerby says. “So I'm impressed with how quickly they're picking up web development skills and their high level of competence.”

All of our state and county offices have at least a default webpage, listing office addresses, staff contacts, and phone numbers. But so far, 17 state offices and a number of county offices have taken the time to go far beyond this to create a virtual office online by offering a variety of information on national and local FSA services.

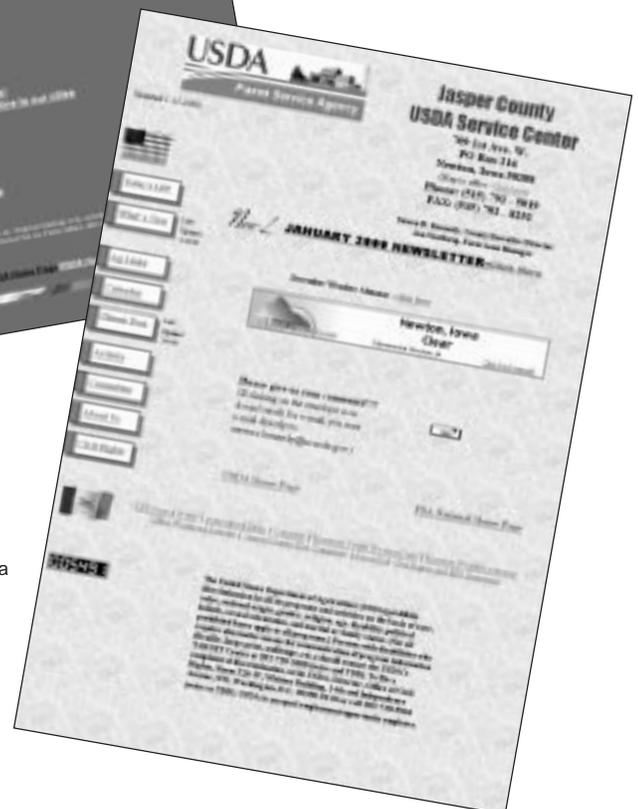
Lee County, Ill. was the first county office to make that leap, thanks to web content provider Jerald Quinton who introduced the site in February 1996. Faye Travis in North Carolina's State Office was the first content provider to create a webpage for each of North Carolina's county offices. That's 100 sites for 100 county offices! Marjorie Crooker in Oregon is not far behind,

with about half of her state's 36 counties up and running. Crooker also provides access to local county newsletters and includes links for state and county staff to our employee Intranet.

California State Office's Erica Szlosek has put together quite an in-depth site with such features as breaking news,



The California State Office features a kids' page.



The Jasper County, Iowa Service Center site includes an extensive agricultural links page.

important dates for farmers, an outreach calendar, farmers' success stories, and a Spanish language page. Szlosek has even built a kids' agricultural page full of educational games, fun facts, and coloring sheets. Jim Meisenheimer in the Minnesota State Office lists sales of inventory property and government foreclosures. He also offers detailed pages on commodities, production, farm loans, conservation, and outreach efforts.

CED Stephen Kennedy and the office staff in the Jasper County, Iowa Service Center calculate and post local loan deficiency payment rates each morning. The staff also provides climate data, county program activity

updates, and a thorough agricultural links page featuring government sources, organizations, publications, and market and weather information.

This is just a sampling of the extensive online resources that FSA national, state, and county offices are providing to the public and for our employees. The necessity for online access to FSA state and county offices is becoming even more crucial with the Administration's emphasis on electronic access (detailed in this month's Administrator's Column). Web access is also one of Under Secretary August Schumacher's top priorities, as he has instructed the FFAS mission area to

increase the use of the web as a means of conducting business.

To answer the Administration's call for greater web access, FSA state and county offices are working to expedite the creation and operation of their webpages. "We're also working to devise a standard look and feel for the entire FSA website," Kerby says. While states and counties will have to adapt to more standardized webpages, they will be able to retain the flavor unique to their regions. "I encourage FSA's web content providers to remain open to change as the FSA website will always be a work in progress," says Kerby.

Barbarika Wins Economist Award

Last December, the USDA Economists Group awarded FSA employee Alex Barbarika its 1999 USDA Economist of the Year Award. Barbarika is an agricultural economist for the Economic and Policy Analysis Staff's Natural Resources Analysis Group. Tom Browning, Barbarika's director, nominated Barbarika for his sustained excellent work on the analysis and evaluation of existing and proposed policies of the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP).

Barbarika's analytical models have won him recognition and praise from many areas, including FSA management, the Office of the Secretary, the Office of the Chief Economist, and other USDA agencies. In addition, he generously assists other government agencies, commodity groups, and academic and environmental organizations in preparing CRP analyses. Browning remarks, "Alex is genuinely recognized as the principal USDA expert on CRP data and analysis. Given his dedication and credible,

reliable work, he really deserves this award."

The USDA Economists Group provides services and pertinent information to its members to aid them in carrying out their professional responsibilities. The group offers workshops and seminars on emerging agriculture, resource conservation, food safety,

research, and rural development issues. The group also distributes a bimonthly newsletter that communicates developments within and outside USDA that may be of interest to members. Those interested in the group can contact Felix Spinelli at felix.spinelli@usda.gov or (202) 690-4164.



Alex Barbarika, center, is presented the 1999 USDA Economist of the Year Award plaque by Ron Meekhof, President of the USDA Economists Group. Tom Browning, Director, Natural Resources Analysis Group, looks on.

Tribal Crop Makes the Grade for FSA Disaster Payments

by Jim Meisenheimer, Regional Public Affairs Specialist

Wild rice is essential to the culture and livelihood of the Bois Forte Band of Chippewa in Nett Lake, Minn. Now this band is the first tribal entity in the Nation to receive a payment for wild rice losses under the Crop Loss Disaster Assistance Program (CLDAP).

Sid Jarvis, CED, South St. Louis County Office, said, "In the past, wild rice wasn't covered by disaster programs because it grows naturally in lakes and was generally considered unmanageable. But recently, the Bois Forte Department of Natural Resources implemented a series of monitoring and management efforts to ensure the long-term health and productivity of the rice. These efforts allowed FSA to qualify the wild rice on a technical basis."

Upon receiving the CLDAP check for \$31,411, Bois Forte Reservation Tribal Council Chairwoman Doris Isham said, "We appreciate FSA's acceptance of wild rice as a nontraditional agricultural crop. Last year, drought conditions and low water levels resulted in a very small rice crop, and many people were left short at the end of the harvesting season."

Much of the work that led to the successful CLDAP payment goes to South St. Louis County Office CED Jarvis and outreach worker Joan Markon, and to North St. Louis County Office Program Technician Linda Alger. They worked hard to forge a good relationship between FSA and the Chippewa band, enabling FSA to better serve the needs of these historic agricultural producers.

The FSA employees worked closely with Dr. Chris Holm, the tribe's biologist, to identify annual rice production and establish production records for Nett Lake. These records can be used



In the wild rice field left to right: Tribal Council Representative Gordon Adams, Tribal Biologist Dr. Chris Holm, CED Sid Jarvis, Tribal Department of Resources Director Corey Strong, Tribal Council Representative Ray Villebrun, and Tribal Council Chairwoman Doris Isham.

to show production losses. Holm is also the Bois Forte's advisor to the local FSA offices, and after becoming aware of CLDAP through work with CED Jarvis, he helped the tribe apply. Holm said, "In the past, FSA only dealt with 'traditional' agriculture. Today FSA staff is reaching out to bands with more specific agricultural needs."

The 7,400-acre Nett Lake is believed to be the largest contiguous wild rice lake in the world. About 3,000-4,000 acres of wild rice beds grow naturally each year. The estimated annual yield potential is between 1 and 4 million pounds of rice. In 1998, harvest of green (unfinished) rice was estimated at about 20,000 pounds. The rice sells for \$5 per pound in area markets.

In the late summer, band members harvest the rice in the traditional way, using canoes and sticks to knock the rice free. Rice that doesn't drop into

the canoes falls back into the lake, creating new plants for the following year. As part of the tribal management, the tribe also sows some of the harvested rice back into the lake to strengthen weak areas of rice.

Chairwoman Isham explained that, "Of the 2,500 band members, about 10 percent harvest rice. The harvesters share the collected rice among family members and the community." The native wild rice is versatile, used in hot dishes, and, unlike paddy-grown rice, wild rice can be popped and eaten as snacks and cereal. Wild rice is traditionally important to the Bois Forte Band and is used in ceremonial food. "Each band family passes the culture and tradition of mahnomen (traditional name of wild rice) on to their children," said Isham. "Rice will always remain central to our way of life."

FSA Goes to the Classroom

by Joseph C. Ulics, CED, Siskiyou County, Calif.

Most of us involved with agriculture have seen a rise in the average age of farmers over the last decade. Fewer and fewer young people are opting for a career in farming. One of the roles of FSA is to provide credit to family-size farmers who cannot obtain credit elsewhere. However, without young people choosing to farm, it is only a matter of time until we see the demise of the family farm.

“What can we do to change this trend?” was the question on the minds of the Siskiyou County Committee and FSA staff. Our discussions led to an outreach effort at our local high school. Intermountain Farm Credit Services Assistant Branch Manager Jeff Bray and I put our heads together and developed a 12-week course on agricultural economics, which we delivered to the students throughout the current school year.

The objective of the course was for students to understand the basics of farm recordkeeping and, along the way, acquire the skills necessary to apply for farm loans. Each week the course focused on different aspects of farm economics, including production records, balance sheets, cash flow, and loan applications. Local farmers took part as guest speakers.

At the end of the course, each student was awarded a certificate, and the local newspaper wrote about the course. This experience was a positive one for me as well as for the local community. I’m confident that the skills we taught in the course are relevant for anyone entering the farming business.



Students with Joseph Ulics (front row, middle) and teacher Jim Isbell, (back row, left).

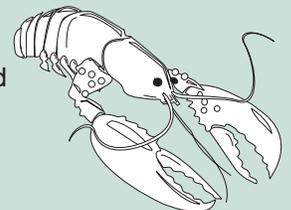


Students working on a farm and home plan.

WHAT EXPENSIVE SEAFOOD WAS ONCE USED AS FERTILIZER?

During the 1700s and early 1800s, there were so many lobsters along the coast of New England that one could walk the beach and just pick them up. Lobsters were so abundant that Native Americans used them as fertilizer and colonists thought of them as food for poor people.

Source: *The Learning Kingdom*



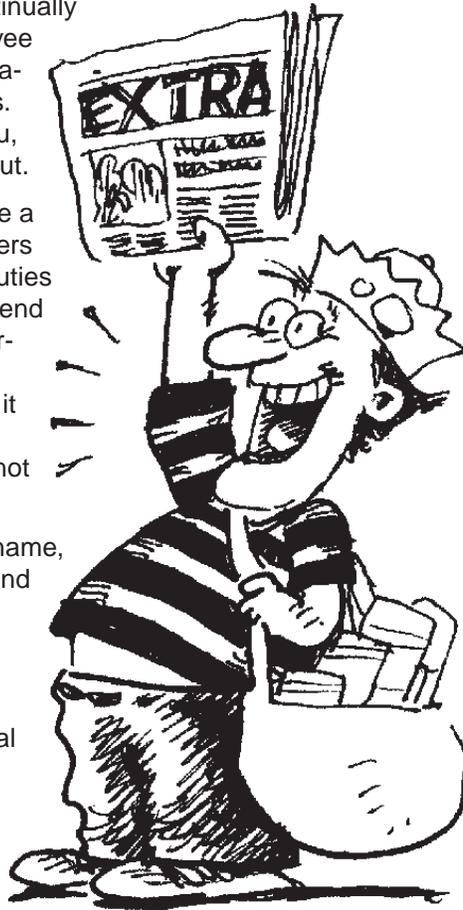
FSA NEWS Wants You!

FSA's Public Affairs Branch is continually striving to ensure that our employee newsletter, FSA NEWS, is informative and of interest to all FSA employees. Since the newsletter is for and about you, the Public Affairs Branch wants your input.

We are looking for employees to become a part of our editorial board. Board members will serve for one year. Editorial board duties will not take much of your time — we spend about an hour each month discussing article ideas and reviewing the content of draft issues. With advanced technology, it doesn't matter where you're located across the country, so your job site will not hinder your participation.

If you are interested, please send your name, your job title, work address, telephone and FAX numbers, and email address to: Editorial Board, FSA, Public Affairs, 1400 Independence Ave., S.W., Washington, D.C. 20250-0506. You will need to obtain your supervisor's approval if you are selected to be a member. Selectees will be notified in writing.

This is a great chance for you to get more involved in our Agency in a creative way, diversify your job skills, and help shape the newsletter!



Answers to February's Puzzle

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THE ORIGIN OF SANDWICH

The word sandwich dates back to the municipal borough of Sandwich, in England near Dover. In the 1760s, the fourth Earl of Sandwich was John Montague, a heavy gambler who liked to stay at the gaming table for many hours. To make this possible, he instructed his servant to bring him pieces of meat and cheese between slices of bread. He could eat these without making a mess, while still keeping one hand free for rolling the dice. Montague's requested snack was not a new invention, but his extended gambling binges were well known. Soon his favorite bread and meat combination was known as a sandwich.

Source: *The Learning Kingdom*

CALENDAR OF UPCOMING EVENTS

| Date | Location | Event |
|----------------|-------------------|---|
| Month of March | | Women's History Month |
| Month of March | | National Nutrition Month |
| March 2-3 | Tucson, Ariz. | Robert Springer, Executive Director for State Operations, to attend NACS/NASE Zone Meeting |
| March 19-25 | | National Agriculture Week |
| March 24-28 | Rosemont, Ill. | Associate Administrator Parks Shackelford to attend 65 th North American Wildlife and Natural Resources Conference |
| March 25-27 | Columbus, Ohio | Vicki Hicks, Deputy Administrator for Commodity Operations, to attend American Commodity Distribution Association National Conference |
| March 28-31 | San Diego, Calif. | Vicki Hicks to attend National Grain and Feed Association Annual Conference |
| March 30-31 | Goodyear, Ariz. | Acting Associate Administrator George Arredondo to attend Arizona Statewide Gleaning Project activities |

Note: The above is subject to change.