

MIDAS Newsletter

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Dear Reader,



Welcome to the 2nd Edition of the MIDAS Press! In this Fall edition, we highlight some key MIDAS project activities, share with you some of the great efforts and achievements being made in the area of program process improvements, introduce you to members of the MIDAS Project Office team, and provide information to keep you engaged and informed of the MIDAS Project development and implementation.

In our first edition, we highlighted the MIDAS Project Kick Off and the FSA Administrator's comments regarding MIDAS being an investment in our FSA County Offices to help our incredible field office staff improve service to farmers and that MIDAS is an effort focused on modernizing the way we do business, cleaning up our processes and becoming more efficient. You can read more about what the Administrator was referring to as it relates to modernizing and improving business processes in the article titled ***"FSA is improving the Farm Program Delivery by Simplifying Forms - Revised Adjusted Gross Income Form In Progress"***. Congratulations to the MIDAS Project team members from the FSA State and County Offices for their great work on this process improvement effort. This is a continuation of the Lean Six

Sigma (LSS) process improvement successes and there's definitely more to come.

For the last year the MIDAS Project Management Office (PMO) focused on the project preparation phase. During this phase we established the foundation for successful implementation by defining the project goals and objectives, clarifying the project scope, schedule, necessary budget and resources, and implementation sequence. We are now beginning the blueprint phase of the project. Our lead story explains this important process, how it will work and how FSA employees are involved. Please read and share your thoughts or questions about the process.

Finally, I want to wish everyone a Happy Thanksgiving! Enjoy the holiday.

Sincerely,

Kimberly Graham, MIDAS Deputy Director,
Change Management and Communications

Blueprint Process for MIDAS Kicks Off

This month the MIDAS project launched an important phase - Blueprinting.

Just as it sounds, the blueprinting phase will identify the requirements of the MIDAS program so that a blueprint can be created to help build the new system.

Often, this effort is compared to the construction of a new home and the work a homeowner completes alongside an architect to show how the end product should look and function. This basic process will be used to define the requirements for MIDAS business processes and system implementation.



Blueprint Overviews and Workshops

The first step in the blueprinting process (Step 2 in the above graphic) launched November 15th 2010 with a series of Program Summary workshops with key FSA staff and stakeholders working closely with the MIDAS core team to discuss each farm program and the high level requirements needed to operate them. These Program Summary workshops will cover all of the FSA Farm Programs.

"By starting with describing the programs and what they need to achieve, we begin with the end in mind," said Chuck Benjamin, MIDAS Deputy Director for Information Technology. "When describing programs and the requirements needed, we'll focus on what the outcome needs to be, rather than the current process steps. This is a great opportunity to simplify and streamline, to really take advantage of the new technology and its capabilities."

One of MIDAS' goals is to cut down on the time it takes to conduct Farm Program benefits processes, which will save time and expedite benefits payments to producers.

Blueprinting will continue through additional iterative requirements gathering steps, culminating in a system design document and a system demonstration scheduled for sometime next year. Other activities will also take place during future iterations and these will be communicated in future editions of the newsletter. Stay tuned to learn more!

FSA is Improving Farm Program Delivery by Simplifying Forms

"Revised Adjusted Gross Income Form In Progress"

USDA conducted a series of Producer and Employee Listening Sessions across the Nation. In addition to gathering feedback from FSA field office staff and producers regarding how information technology can help to improve farm program service delivery, we heard that our current program forms and policies are complex and need to be simplified in order to improve the efficient delivery of programs. One form that was consistently identified as a "pain point" for both county offices and producers was the Average Adjusted Gross Income (AGI) Statement, CCC-926 form.

The CCC-926 form was described as complicated and included language and questions that were difficult for most readers to understand. As a result, county office employees stated they spent on average 15 minutes per producer just explaining the form.

In response to these frustrations, the MIDAS Project team, the Deputy Administrator, Farm Programs and the Production, Emergencies, and Compliance Division (PECD) worked collaboratively to identify opportunities to improve the form. The form was redesigned to:

- Simplify the language.
- Improve the flow of the questions.
- Expand and enhance instructions for completing the form.
- Emphasize and clarify the special rule that applies when 66.66 percent or more of the total Adjusted gross income is received from farming.

The revised CCC-926 form is being tested as part of a pilot project which is currently underway in a limited number of county offices. The goal is to meet a 50 percent reduction in the time spent explaining and completing the form. If this is

achieved, this process improvement could potentially save the agency and producers a combined, estimated 300,000 hours per year.

Survey forms and general feedback from the County Offices participating in the pilot project will be collected at the conclusion of the pilot. If the feedback indicates that the revised form and instructions are an improvement over the existing form, then the new form will be finalized and approved for Nation-wide release. The pilot project results will be provided in the coming weeks. Please stay tuned!

Meet the Staff! - Laura Schlote



As a girl growing up on a farm in rural upstate New York, Laura Schlote would be up at 4 a.m. to help milk the cows on her family's dairy farm. Her agricultural upbringing taught her the values she brings to the Farm Service Agency on a daily basis. "I learned the value of the dollar and lived with the inevitable cycle of life and death," she said. "Growing up on our farm taught me how to work efficiently as part of a team and really how to be resourceful – to do more with less."

Schlote, a 24-year FSA employee, brings those values and her professional experience to an important part of the MIDAS project. Currently, she leads the Marketing Assistance Loan (MAL) team. "My previous roles have given me extensive knowledge of all areas of price support, especially MALs, automation, and CMAs. Also, being from the field is extremely important

because it helps you understand where the interactions take place, essentially where the rubber meets the road," she said.

Schlote foresees the MIDAS program improving farm program benefits and services in several ways. "MIDAS will help FSA work smarter and give us a chance to catch up to private industry," she said. "MIDAS will allow FSA to communicate electronically and to interact in the real world in real time by allowing farmers and ranchers to do business 24/7." Because each county currently has a separate system, Schlote quipped, "We are all in different lakes, and we need to get in the same ocean."

The biggest goal Schlote would like to see achieved from the implementation of MIDAS is having accurate, real-time data that can be accessed anytime, anywhere by all FSA stakeholders. "It would be ideal to have a 24/7 business shop where farmers and ranchers are able to do their work, apply for loans, etc. We need better electronic communications because currently it is very limited," she said. When asked about short term goals, Schlote's face lit up. "I am very excited and anxious for the MIDAS blueprinting phase," she said. "It will be a time when thoughts and plans finally make it onto paper and everyone can see more things come to fruition. I am looking forward to the Proof of Concept being available and demonstrating it to county staff."

Currently, Schlote lives with her husband and two sons in Frederick, Maryland, "I was drawn to Frederick because of the vast amount of agriculture and the quality of the school systems." Additionally, she mused, "If it's been a particularly stressful day, I don't mind the hour-long drive home from work to decompress." Her eldest son is a junior at West Virginia University and her youngest son is a senior in high school with plans to attend Penn State next year. A Penn State graduate herself, it is no surprise that Schlote is an avid college football fan and an even bigger Nittany Lion fan. The family dog is even named "Nittany".

During her free time, Schlote enjoys golfing, relaxing, trips to the beach, watching the Yankees and Giants, and of course, watching her favorite team, Penn State. She also is active with church mission work and has on several occasions visited Guatemala.

Meet the Staff! - Ben Berry



Ben Berry has traveled the world over, but most fascinating of all is that he has been somewhere that no others can experience again. Berry is one of the last few people to travel through the Three Gorges in China and see the original waterline. On his unique trip in 2004, Berry witnessed some incredible sites. "My group toured one of the 'ghost cities' and I could still see a few people running around and hiding from the officials. This particular city used to house nearly a quarter million people, but many were unwillingly displaced across the river to a higher location where a new city was built," Berry said.

Berry's love for travel couples well with his great appreciation for the arts and culture. He enjoys the symphony, museums, opera, and the occasional ballet. Immersing himself in art and travel helps Berry disengage from the complicated details of his work and refreshes him. Berry is the Information Technology (IT) Specialist – Basis Administrator for the MIDAS project. Though many might associate IT projects with being cut and dry, Berry believes his appreciation for the arts and creativity help in his

daily work. "Most people think IT is binary in that it either works or it doesn't," Berry said. "On the contrary, there can be a lot of creativity involved. There are multiple ways to solve the problem while still staying within the confines of the rules. It's a matter of what works best for a given environment." In terms of MIDAS, Berry believes the same principle applies. "There is definitely an opportunity for creativity because there are a large number of groups involved. We are trying to get disparate teams and organizations to work together."

Berry also suspects that the potential for improving farm program benefits and services is tremendous because the technology that is currently being used is quite outdated. "MIDAS would bring technology up to current standards...from the technical aspect, the data would be more centralized, instead of spread across 2,300 different county offices," Berry said. Having centralized data would equate to more immediate data recalls as well as data availability around the clock. "Part of the big push is to allow more capability to occur at the county offices, to give them better tools with which to work," Berry said.

Prior to joining the Farm Service Agency in January 2010, Berry worked several years as an IT consultant on government contracts and gained invaluable experience managing people and projects. While Berry is rather familiar with other technology systems, SAP is actually new to him. "I have spent an enormous amount of time learning new software and implementing new software, so it helped with learning SAP," Berry said. "In the beginning I picked up books on SAP and just started reading. Then I began doing formal online and live classes." Berry is disciplined when it comes to learning new systems. "I always try to review the material before attending class...if it is a week-long class, I normally wake up really early around 4 a.m. to review the material from the day before," he said.

Originally from Austin, Texas, Berry went to Southwest Texas State University (now known as Texas State) and majored in political science. Berry worked nights while in school and it was not until he got a job with the state of Texas for a legislative budgeting branch did he learn he had an aptitude for IT. "They asked me to put in a network one day and I not only realized I was good at it, but I also really enjoyed it," Berry said. In 1997, Berry moved to Washington, D.C., to pursue other jobs. "I like the D.C. area because it is probably one of the most livable cities on the east coast, has great culture, and I get to enjoy four seasons - I had never before seen snow!" Berry said. On the weekends, Berry likes to unwind with his two Basset Hounds, Maggie and Murphy, and partake in the region's rich cultural experiences.

MIDAS Mind Teaser

Think you've got the smarts? See if you know the answer to this MIDAS question. Answer is below.

MIDAS has been executing several quick-hit projects through their Lean Six Sigma (LSS) business process improvement efforts. Responding to feedback from the field offices, MIDAS changed the signature authority process, allowing producers to self-certify their signature authority on the CCC-902 form by simply checking a box.

Q: What are the projected savings from the solution implemented?

- A. \$5,000,000
- B. \$6,000,000
- C. \$7,000,000
- D. \$8,000,000

Leadership Corner - Karl Keller



As Deputy Director of Requirements and Project Management, I lead the team charged with making sure we gather the right business requirements, identify gaps or areas that need to be addressed, and then help to see that FSA's business needs are reflected in the final design of the MIDAS system. A key component of designing the future system involves re-engineering the business. Re-engineering simply implies eliminating non-value added steps and re-thinking business processes and procedures that lead to streamlined business processes.

During a major IT implementation, such as MIDAS, an excellent understanding of the current (As-Is) process is needed in order to design and develop a better future (To-Be) process. Our diverse team of farm programs experts brings the knowledge, experience, and practical understanding of farm programs and service delivery to ensure the "right" business needs are captured and reflected in the successful implementation of MIDAS. I bring to MIDAS years of experience on large, transformation projects and I am fortunate to have built a team comprised of knowledgeable and experienced FSA field office staff.

I couldn't be happier with the energy and positive momentum I am finding across the MIDAS program. Each and every team member has fully dedicated themselves to the mission and retains a vital link back to the field to help in our efforts to develop a solution that is relevant and helpful to FSA in better serving our nation's producers.

We look forward to working with you on the MIDAS program. At any point along the journey, please feel free to reach out to me or submit any questions or comments through our AskMIDAS webpage at <http://askmidas.custhelp.com>

Did You Know? - ERP

ERP stands for Enterprise Resource Planning and it is a term that is often misunderstood. It generally refers to an integrated business software system so that the key parts of an enterprise's business data is available in real time, providing managers and leadership insights that allow them to make better decisions.

In a typical ERP implementation, an organization's finance, supply chain, budget, and HR functions are managed by a single, integrated software platform that by design shares data across the modules.

MIDAS is using SAP as the integrated software platform to support FSA modernization of Farm Programs. SAP stands for Systems, Applications and Products in Data Processing. It is the leading ERP vendor in the world.

Preparing for Change Requires A Plan - Organizational Change Management

MIDAS will bring about many changes in FSA. Changes not only in the supporting software and technology but in the way we do business. Change = People + Process + Technology. Organizational Change Management (OCM) addresses the "People" part of this equation. A widely known critical success factor for any effective IT project is organizational change management. But what exactly is OCM?

OCM is an approach to ensuring that an organization - namely, its people - transitions successfully to the new way of doing business as a result of transformative changes in process and

technology. This is accomplished, in part, by communicating clearly about the who, what, where, when, how and why of change. Who will be impacted? What is going to change about my day-to-day job? Where and when will changes take place? How will I learn the new way of doing business? And, why do we need to change?

But OCM isn't just about communications. OCM consists of a wide range of planned, best practice activities aimed at involving everyone who is impacted by business transformation. These proactive measures help people learn about their changing job roles and responsibilities, provide new skills training and knowledge transfer and ensure that everyone has ongoing access to the information they need to make sense of the changing and changed environment.

Why is OCM important? Basically, OCM is a risk-management strategy. Research shows that projects lacking an OCM component are more likely to be delayed or to fail. A strong OCM program can increase the probability of a successful project implementation. OCM prepares the organization for change, helps people accept and adapt to the change and provides a framework for sustaining change long after the project is implemented.

MIDAS is an agency-wide project that will affect 2,244 field offices, 51 state offices and IT and program staff in Washington, Kansas City, St. Louis and Salt Lake City. MIDAS has tapped Kimberly Graham as Deputy Director of Change Management and Communications to lead the OCM effort. Graham and the OCM team are dedicated to ensuring that the "people" side of MIDAS thrives as MIDAS moves toward transforming the way that FSA delivers farm program benefits.

MIDAS Question Corner

Question: Is there going to be any initiative to educate farmers on how to use the applications you're going to put out there?

Answer: Thanks for your recent inquiry. It is FSA's goal to provide better service delivery to our producers nationwide. One way in which we hope to enhance our service delivery is to provide customers with the ability to apply for services and benefits online. We envisioned providing online help features and capabilities that will help to educate farmers on how to submit applications or request other services and benefits online.

In addition to the online help features, we will consider all options to help educate our customers on how to take full advantage of all new services and benefits that can help to improve their experience with the Farm Service Agency. Therefore, as we move forward in the MIDAS development and implementation, we will consider ways in which FSA staff can help to educate farmers in their local areas regarding the use of information technology in obtaining FSA services and benefits.

Got a Question? Let us know:
<http://askmidas.custhelp.com>

MIDAS IT Corner

Gathering, Testing, and Tracking Business Requirements - How Is It Done?

As the MIDAS team kicks off its requirements gathering phase, just how will the program keep track of all of these requirements? How will they know what needs to be tested? And how will they track defects discovered through testing?

The answer to these questions can be found in one software tool - something called Hewlett Packard Quality Center, or HPQC. This is a testing tool that enables end users to log requirements and create test cases for one project in a single location. Requirements can be traced for each test case and each test case can be traced to defects, which can then be routed

back to the requirements that caused the error in the first place.

MIDAS chose HPQC as its testing tool because of its wide use in industry and for the way it works well with SAP, the Commercial off-the-shelf (COTS) solution that MIDAS will be using. Another big advantage of HPQC is its ease of usability for testers. HPQC also provides a central repository for test cases where they can be reused and statuses of those test cases can be stored. Essentially, HPQC is a one-stop shop for requirements, test cases and tracking defects.

Staff supporting the MIDAS project will receive hands-on training with the goal of providing the training just before the user needs to use HPQC. MIDAS is currently working with several individuals within FSA to get HPQC stood up and on each team member's computer.

Once the system is available, MIDAS project teams will utilize workspaces within HPQC to configure forms for work teams to complete and capture requirements. These work teams will consist of MIDAS team members, the system integrator and the MIDAS business teams led by Lisa Berry, Elizabeth Miller, and Laura Schlote.

MIDAS Business Corner

Letter from Washington, D.C.



There is a big difference from a 10-minute, one blinking light, commute into the small town of

Hempstead, Texas, to a 45-minute Metro ride into Washington, D.C., but this is part of my new life as a member of the MIDAS project team. It's one of many changes I've experienced since coming to Washington a few months ago.

As a former County Executive Director, I decided to take this leap knowing that the MIDAS project is very important for the overall success of the Farm Service Agency. I feel that I can make a difference. I am happy to have joined a team composed of county office staff that were former program technicians, county executive directors, and state office folk that were former specialists.

The MIDAS team and I had the opportunity to participate in Lean Six Sigma training and we each earned our basic training yellow belt. Much to my surprise I did not have to break any wooden boards to achieve this title. Our trainer, Mr. Dan Thompson, taught us that Six Sigma is a business strategy to improve the quality of processes by identifying and removing the causes of errors and minimizing variability in business processes. The training is a great tool that we can utilize in developing new processes for our Farm Programs.

Jonathan Coppess, Administrator of FSA, met with the team individually and he expressed his overall support of the MIDAS project. He thinks we are each an integral part in the success of the project. We each had the opportunity to articulate any thoughts or concerns to Mr. Coppess and he gratefully answered each of us with sincerity.

Needless to say, joining the MIDAS project has been a great challenge thus far, but the benefits of the success of the project will make every challenge worthwhile. We as a team look forward to the blueprinting phase of the project in which we will be decomposing each Farm Program to its nuts and bolts. This phase will take time, but it is crucial to the overall success of this venture.

Darrin Watkins
MIDAS Business Process Team Analyst

Answer to Mind Teaser: D

Have a puzzling acronym? Send it along to:
askmidas@usda.gov