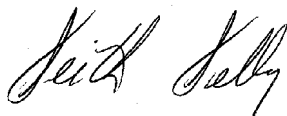


For: All FSA Offices

New Online Forms Service for FSA, NRCS, and RD Customer Forms

Approved by: Administrator



1 Online Forms Service

A

Background

FSA, NRCS, and RD have developed a new electronic forms service to make selected forms available to their customers on the Internet. The goal of this new service is to provide our agricultural producer customers, their agents, and our lender partners with an alternative method for providing the information that is required for them to participate in our programs and services.

The success of this new service depends greatly on a consistent implementation across the 3 agencies and how well FSA, NRCS, and RD staff in the field promote its use to their customers. In an effort to facilitate a successful implementation, the 3 agencies developed a tri-agency directive to describe the new service and the implementation actions required of State and Service Center Offices, see Exhibit 1.

B

Action

FSA State and Service Center Offices shall:

- carefully read the information in Exhibit 1
- take the action in Exhibit 1, paragraph 6
 - update the Office Information Profile (OIP) by December 22, 2000
 - distribute the information provided for newsletters as quickly as possible but not later than December 29, 2000.

Disposal Date	Distribution
December 1, 2002	All FSA Offices; State Offices relay to County Offices

USDA E-commerce Initiative

IMPLEMENTATION OF A NEW ONLINE E-FORMS SERVICE BY FSA, NRCS, AND RD**1 BACKGROUND**

The Farm Service Agency (FSA), Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), and Rural Development (RD) are required by law to develop and implement processes that support electronic submission, maintenance, or disclosure of information as a substitute for paper. The laws requiring this change include the Government Paperwork Elimination Act (GPEA) and the Freedom to E-file Act.

GPEA requires all Federal agencies to provide the following by October 2003:

- the option of electronic maintenance, submission, and disclosure of information
- acceptance of electronic signatures.

The Freedom to E-File act is specifically targeted to FSA, NRCS, RD, and includes similar requirements for the Risk Management Agency (RMA). This legislation requires the implementation of electronic commerce (e-commerce) services by FSA, NRCS, and RD in two phases.

- In Phase 1 (by December 18, 2000), these agencies are required to:
 - make forms used by agricultural producers and user instructions available on the Internet, and
 - permit forms to be downloaded and submitted via facsimile, mail, or similar means.
- In Phase 2 (by June 20, 2002), these agencies are required to provide:
 - agricultural producers the option to electronically file forms and all other documentation required to participate in agency programs and services, and
 - electronic access to public information on farm programs, quarterly trade, economic and production reports, and other similar information.

The Freedom to E-File Act (the Act) also requires FSA, NRCS, and RD to use common technologies and software applications to provide these services to their customers.

2 PURPOSE

This document:

- Announces the deployment of initial services required by Phase 1 of the Act.
- Provides an overview of the new services.

USDA E-commerce Initiative (Continued)

- Provides instructions on encouraging the customers of FSA, NRCS, and RD to use these services.
- Defines policies and procedures related to using e-commerce as an alternate service delivery method.

3 NEW SERVICE CENTER E-COMMERCE WEB SITE

FSA, NRCS, and RD developed a common Internet web site to host its e-commerce services. The address of the new web site is <http://www.sc.egov.usda.gov>.

The first service on the web site is e-forms. This service includes an initial set of forms used primarily by agricultural producers, their agents, and agency lender partners. Additional forms will be continuously added to the web site. These include forms used to participate in programs available through the Rural Business Cooperative Service and the Rural Utilities Service.

A Web Site Features

The web site has the following features.

- A search function where forms can be located by number, program area, or agency name.
- Forms can be completed on-line and printed or downloaded to users' PCs along with the data entered.
- Form instructions that can be displayed or printed.
- A frequently asked questions (FAQ) section to provide immediate assistance with common inquiries.
- Help links to provide navigational and web site use assistance.
- Links to the service center Office Information Profile (OIP) where customers can locate office addresses and telephone numbers and get directions to service centers.
- Links to other useful web sites.

B E-Forms Software

A software tool called OmniForms is being used to support the e-forms service. OmniForms displays forms on the screen and highlights the fields where data is entered. Users can simply select the desired form and begin entering information. Once data entry is complete, the form can be printed. However, the form and data cannot be viewed online or saved and reused unless users download and install the OmniForms plug-in.

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USDA E-commerce Initiative (Continued)

1 OmniForms Plug-in

One of the benefits of the OmniForms tool is that the form can be downloaded to user's PCs and saved along with the data entered. This feature permits users to retrieve the form and the data later without having to go on-line. Use of this feature requires users to download the OmniForms plug-in which is a small software application that runs on user's PCs. The OmniForms plug-in is available on the service center e-commerce web site along with instructions on how to download and install it.

2 PDF Versions of Forms

Many of the forms on the new web site are also available in the familiar PDF format. This format has limited functionality compared to the OmniForms versions. This format will continue to be available for a limited time as an aide to our customers during our migration to e-commerce services.

C User Assistance**1 Programmatic Assistance**

Service center staff have the expertise needed to assist customers on all aspects of our programs and services. Service centers will continue to be the customer's point of contact and primary service delivery provider.

2 Technical Assistance

A technical support help desk has been established to assist users with technical problems associated with using the web site. These include downloading and installing the plug-in, downloading and saving forms, and general navigation and use of the web site. The technical support help desk is not intended to respond to questions about programs, services, or what information to enter on forms.

Technical assistance will be available Monday through Friday from 5:00 a.m. to midnight (mountain time) and from 7:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. (mountain time) on Saturday and Sunday through a toll-free telephone number. The technical support telephone number is 1 800-457-3642.

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USDA E-commerce Initiative (Continued)

4 SUBMITTING FORMS TO USDA

Forms cannot be e-mailed to USDA at this time. They must be either faxed, mailed, or delivered to the service center.

The service center agencies do not yet have the mechanisms in place to accept an electronic version of a customer's signature as an alternative to an original or facsimile signature. The mechanisms required include methods to authenticate the legal identity of the sender (user authentication) and methods to ensure that the information provided was not altered during transmission (data encryption). The FAX Signature Card used by FSA for example, offers a legal remedy to a challenge of whether or not the signature on a document is authentic. An electronic equivalent of the FAX Signature Card has not been selected at this time. Accordingly, USDA could be at increased risk of fraud and abuse if electronic versions of documents were accepted without an original or facsimile signature. Software tools and procedures to provide user authentication and data encryption are being evaluated and will become available for our use in the future.

5 ENCOURAGING CUSTOMERS TO USE E-COMMERCE SERVICES

USDA has committed to offering e-commerce services as an alternative to our traditional one-on-one service delivery approach. The e-forms service is just the first step in meeting the longer-term objective of offering on-line services that will permit customers to complete entire transactions electronically. The number of customers in each area that have an interest in using this alternative varies greatly but is forecast to continuously grow.

Electronic services will not replace the need for service centers or staff. Customers are expected to continue visiting service centers for personalized service for years to come. Offering customers expanded access to information and new methods for providing the information will reduce the need for visits to service centers in some areas allowing service center personnel to allocate more time to customers that visit our offices and other program delivery functions. Customers interested in using this alternative will be able to perform these functions from their homes and offices without being limited to service centers hours.

Service center staff need to inform their customers of the availability of this alternative and assist any interested customers utilize the service. Brochures that provide information for customer's use in accessing and using the new e-forms service are being prepared to assist this effort. They are expected to be distributed to service centers within 60 days. In the interim, the information in Exhibit A is provided for service center staff to learn how to access and use the web site and to distribute through newsletters and other methods as a short-term means of introducing the service and discussing it with interested customers.

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USDA E-commerce Initiative (Continued)

6 STATE AND SERVICE CENTER ACTION

- A State and service center OIP stewards shall verify that service center facsimile numbers are properly recorded in OIP and make any necessary updates.
- B Visit the new e-commerce web site and become familiar with its operation. Use the knowledge of the web site to encourage and assist interested customers use the new service.
- C Do not accept documents via e-mail until standard user authentication and data encryption methods are implemented.
- D Follow established procedures for accepting facsimile documents.
- E Distribute the information in Exhibit A through newsletters and other available methods as quickly as possible.
- F Distribute the brochure announcing the new web site to producers visiting service centers and FSA and RD lender's offices. Ask lenders to provide it to customers requesting direct and guaranteed loans.
- G Make every effort to ensure that customers are informed about the new service and encourage its use.

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USDA E-commerce Initiative (Continued)

Exhibit A

Suggested Text for Newsletters

The Farm Service Agency, Natural Resources Conservation Service, and Rural Development agencies announced the availability of a new e-commerce service on the World Wide Web. The address of the new web site is <http://www.sc.egov.usda.gov>. The new web site will be available on December 18, 2000 and will replace other sites for these agencies that provide electronic forms.

The first feature on the new web site is electronic forms (eForms). This service offers access to many of the forms customers most frequently use. To access it, log on to the Internet through your Internet service provider and enter <http://www.sc.egov.usda.gov>. That will take you to the service center e-Commerce home page. Click on the "eForms" icon to go to the page where you can search for forms by number, program area, or agency.

First time users need to download and install a "plug-in" to take full advantage of the services available on the eForms web site. Installing the plug-in is easy. Connect to the Internet through your Internet service provider. Once you're on-line, type <http://www.sc.egov.usda.gov> in the address and press the enter key. That will take you to the USDA eCommerce homepage. Now click on the eForms icon to go to the eForms page and click on the "Help" link. Now click on the "Need help downloading and installing the OmniForms or Adobe Acrobat" link and follow the instructions.

Once the plug-in is installed on your computer, go back to the USDA eCommerce homepage and click on the eForms icon to go to the eForms page. Here you can search for forms either by their numbers or by a program area or an agency's name. When you find the form you want, click on the blue highlighted OmniForm format and it will appear on the screen. Fill it out, print it, and you have a completed form that's ready for faxing or mailing. Many of the forms are also available in the PDF format for a limited time.

Using the OmniForms version of the forms provides a significant advantage over the PDF version. The forms and information recorded into the OmniForms version can be downloaded and saved on your own computer, giving you access to the forms and information without having to go online. This will permit you to reuse standard information, like your name and address, without having to retype it.

Your FSA, NRCS, or RD service center office will be available during normal business hours to provide any assistance you need in understanding the forms or the information that needs to be recorded. We will continue to be your point of contact for any questions of this nature.

Technical assistance on **using the web site** and the OmniForms plug-in is available by calling 1 800-457-3642. The technical help service is available Monday through Friday from 5:00 a.m. to midnight (mountain time) and from 7:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. (mountain time) on Saturday and Sunday.

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USDA E-commerce Initiative (Continued)

Some of the advantages of using the eForms service include the following:

- Fewer trips to USDA service centers
- No lines, no waiting
- Forms can be saved on your computer, giving you access to them without going online
- No need to retype information when you save a completed form on your computer
- Fill out the forms when its most convenient for you, day or night
- Toll-free technical support

Frequently Asked Questions**What forms are available on-line?**

Many of the forms most frequently used by our customers are already available. A complete list of the forms available can be displayed or printed from the web site by performing a search using the default criteria of "All" for agency and "All" for program name. Additional forms will be added every month for a while. Check the web site often to see what's new.

Who do I have to call to get online?

There are numerous local, regional, and national Internet Service Providers (ISPs) who can provide you Internet connection services. Ask a friend or computer retailer for suggestions.

What kind of computer do I need?

To download and save forms, the minimum configuration recommended is: a 486 PC (not a Mac) with 32 megabytes of RAM, 30 megabytes of free disk space, and a modem. The PC needs to be running Windows 95 or higher and either Netscape 4.08 or Internet Explorer 4.0 or higher.

What kind of printer do I need?

Whatever printer you're currently using should work fine for printing forms.

What is a plug-in and how do I plug it in?

A plug-in is a mini program that a computer uses to perform a special function. To "plug it in" click the "Help" link on the eForms page and then click the "Need help downloading the OmniForm Plug-in or Adobe Acrobat" link and follow the instructions. Call the technical help desk at 1 800-457-3642 if you need assistance.

If I fill out the form on-line, can I submit it to USDA on-line or send it via e-mail?

No. You must either fax, mail, or personally deliver it to the USDA service center.

USDA E-commerce Initiative (Continued)

Do people who use the Internet get special treatment?

No. Everyone is treated the same. These online services are only an effort to make it easier to meet the paperwork demands of our programs.

Can someone else print out this information for me?

Certainly. Ask a friend or check with a local library or school. They may have computers that you can use to get the forms you want.

What about privacy? Will the Government collect information about me?

No personal information will be collected through this service.

What are the web site's hours?

The web site is always available.

Can't I just get forms the old way?

Yes, our service centers will continue to operate as always. Online services are a convenience, not a requirement.
