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Permanent Access Planning: Preservation of USDA Digital Documents Recent Preservation Activities at the National Agricultural Library

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The purpose of this session entitled "Permanent Access Planning: Preservation of USDA Digital Documents" is to describe what we think is a unique, proactive, and collaborative approach to preserving and ensuring access to digital publications from one of the largest Federal agencies, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). The approach we will tell you about has strong support from USDA administrators.

The four speakers on this panel will cover the topic in this fashion:

- I will provide some background on the National Agricultural Library (NAL) and its recent preservation activities;
- Greg Lawrence from Cornell will outline the steps that led up to a major 2-day conference held last month to focus on the major elements and requirements of a digital publications preservation plan for USDA;
- Evelyn Frangakis from NAL will talk about what actually happened at that conference; and
- Paul Uhler, a consultant with major responsibilities at the conference and since, will discuss the results of the conference.

Let me begin with a brief overview of the National Agricultural Library. NAL is one of four national libraries--the others are the Library of Congress, the National Library of Medicine, and the National Library of Education. NAL is part of USDA's Agricultural Research Service and serves as the departmental library for USDA and as a national library. USDA was charged with the role of "acquiring and preserving all information concerning agriculture" when Abraham Lincoln established USDA in 1862, and NAL has that primary responsibility.

NAL is located in Beltsville, Maryland, just outside Washington, DC. The library occupies a 14-story building, and has a collection of 2.2 million volumes, a staff of more than 200 Federal employees and contractors, and a budget of approximately \$20 million per year. The collection is international, and covers the literature on all aspects of agriculture and related sciences and social sciences. The information and database services of NAL are available to anyone.

The mission of NAL, in brief, is to ensure and enhance access to agricultural information for a better quality of life. The importance of "Preservation" is mentioned in NAL's full mission statement, in its values statement, and in its vision statement. "Preservation" is also a part of one of NAL's three strategic planning key result areas, and one of the library's eleven general goals is devoted to preservation. Key result area number 2 is titled "Collection Enhancement and Preservation," and the definition reads:

The goals under this key result area address how the NAL staff will ensure that agricultural information essential to the Nation is identified, acquired and preserved at the local, national and international levels.

An important part of that definition is the last part--NAL does not do everything itself, but instead collaborates with the land-grant community and other organizations to make sure that agricultural information is preserved.

Despite the emphasis on preservation in all the key documents mentioned above, NAL has not had significant resources to devote to preservation activities. NAL budget initiatives to improve preservation efforts in the 1980's were never successful. Even without additional funding, however, NAL was involved in several preservation-related activities beginning in the late 1980's.

1. In 1989, NAL did a preservation self-study that was facilitated by the Association of Research Libraries/Office of Management Services. The resulting publication is entitled A Preservation Plan for the National Agricultural Library.
2. Based in part on that report, a special preconference on the preservation of agricultural literature in the U.S. was held at the 1991 conference of the U.S. Agricultural Information Network (USAIN)--an association of individuals and organizations interested in agricultural information. One of the topics explored at the preconference was the development of a national plan for preserving agricultural literature.
3. Following that preconference, USAIN asked Nancy Gwinn of the Smithsonian Institution Libraries to work with a task force to develop such a plan. In 1993, that plan was issued as A National Preservation Program for Agricultural Literature. That plan outlined preservation responsibilities for specific subsets of agricultural literature and proposed which institutions should have which responsibility. NAL used the report as the basis for a request for Congressional funding that would enable the Library to meet its responsibilities in a national preservation program.

4. In FY 1996, Congress approved funds for NAL to build a stronger, better focused internal preservation program and to assume its leadership role in coordinating national preservation efforts. In the short time since funding was received, several activities have been initiated at NAL. These activities parallel the recommendations from the USAIN report and include the following:

- In January of this year, Evelyn Frangakis joined NAL as our first full-time Preservation Officer.
- A comprehensive analysis and evaluation of NAL's microfilm holdings is being conducted to ensure long-term preservation and access to these materials.
- NAL has moved into the digital preservation arena by digitizing approximately 15,000 pages of Federal agricultural documents.
- A plan was implemented to upgrade NAL's Special Collections program to preserve and improve access to NAL's rare and unique materials.

NAL and its library partners have well established procedures for collecting, managing and preserving the hardcopy print literature. As the agencies of USDA move to electronic dissemination of their serials and reports, NAL has developed new procedures to handle electronic formats, and has become the lead organization within USDA for addressing the broader issues faced by agencies that issue electronic publications. One of those issues is how to ensure access to those electronic publications for future generations.

That broad issue--how to preserve and provide perpetual access to USDA publications in electronic format--will now be addressed by the other speakers.