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Report on the Meeting USDA Digital Publications: Creating a Preservation Action Plan

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Given that a number of U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) agencies have begun publishing exclusively in electronic form, the National Agricultural Library (NAL) and other key stakeholders and responsible parties believe it is essential to develop a preservation plan for digital USDA publications as soon as possible. Such a plan will need to be developed together with the Department's Chief Information Officer and key representatives of all USDA agencies, other responsible Federal Government entities, such as the Government Printing Office (GPO) and the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), the land-grant university libraries, and other non-governmental institutions and groups in the agricultural community.

The NAL, with the Economic Research Service of the USDA (ERS), GPO, Cornell University, and the Farm Foundation, recently took the first step in a cooperative venture by convening a 2-day meeting, held March 3-4, 1997 in Washington, DC, with representatives of many of the above groups to begin to identify the major elements and requirements of such a plan. Under the auspices of the NAL, the meeting was organized by Cornell University's Albert R. Mann Library. The meeting served as a call to action to develop a preservation strategy for USDA digital publications.

A number of key agencies were represented and provided support and input to the task at hand. Tom Kalil, Senior Director, White House National Economic Council, presented the keynote address and provided the broad administrative approach. He discussed research, technology, publication trends, and information policy matters. Kalil noted the cost-effectiveness of this digital technology on a life cycle basis.

Trends on the technology side include:

1. Storage costs are dropping dramatically.
2. Archiving of multimedia -- what will we do with object-oriented databases?

3. The rate of technological change is enormous -- archiving of software and machine.

4. Archivists are interested in broader context of information as well as information -- how is that preserved in a digital world? There are some technologies and standards that will make it easier to read digital information.

Some new directions in information policy noted include:

- The transfer to digital should be relatively easy (costs are decreasing rapidly).
- Agencies need to think about how information is generated to prepare for its management and preservation.
- The notion of going from hot lists to wish lists (People are taking the subject domain by looking at what's out there on the Internet. It would be better to have domain experts look at what should be out there.)
- The movement toward communities of interest, which are based on shared motivation rather than geography. Communities of interest are often engaged in sharing information, communication, transactions (ex: BioNet -- includes different threaded news groups). They demonstrate increasing returns -- those communities that are large will get larger with time. Are they worth archiving? Could they be useful to historians in understanding how decisions were made? Who is responsible for archiving the information?

Anne Thomson Reed, Acting Chief Information Officer, Office of Information and Records Management (OIRM), discussed the need to manage information now in order to keep it for the future. She reiterated Abraham Lincoln's vision as he established the Department, "to acquire and diffuse among the people of the United States useful information on subjects connected with agriculture." To ensure this information would be there for future generations, Lincoln committed the Department to "acquiring and preserving all information concerning agriculture."

Catherine E. Woteki, Acting Under Secretary for Research, Education and Economics, noted that the ideas generated at the meeting will have long-reaching benefits for future researchers, analysts, educators, and the public in accessing the vast body of information produced by the USDA.

Pru Adler, Assistant Executive Director, Federal Relations and Information Policy, Association of Research Libraries, addressed "Issues and Challenges in the Long-Term Retention of Digital Publications." The key themes of her talk were:

1. the context for change--why new models are needed;
2. the need to build and develop new infrastructures for networked-based preservation and access activities; and
3. a call to initiate additional preservation programs and pilots.

Adler reported on efforts of the National Research Council and joint efforts of the Commission on Preservation and Access and the Research Libraries Group. She mentioned the following common themes:

- Preservation of information resources, especially digital format, merits additional focus and support;
- Archival and preservation responsibilities rest with the creator and/or owner and digital archives may act as fail-safe mechanisms to protect valuable information resources for future use;
- Adoption of the life-cycle concept - creation, access, maintenance, and preservation issues - should be addressed at the point of origin;
- The development of a decentralized system of archive centers;
- Development of these distribution centers or a federation is fundamentally different from current archival and preservation practices;
- Issues relating to standards, education, funding, and competing technologies are critical; and
- Pilot projects and programs will both explore and resolve some key issues and serve as a means to manage the transition to the digital, networked environment.

The land-grant perspective was offered by Sam Demas, meeting co-chair and head of collection development and preservation at the Albert Mann Library at Cornell University. Sam discussed the preservation arena and laid out premises on which the meeting was based. Greg Lawrence, government information librarian at Cornell University, spoke about the measure of the challenge presented in preserving digital USDA information.

The day's first panel, on existing models for long-term retention of digital information, was moderated by project consultant Paul Uhlir and included:

- Hedy Rossmeissl, Senior Program Administrator for Data and Information Delivery, U.S. Geological Survey;
- Richard Davis, Data Administrator, National Climatic Data Center, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA);
- Janet Vavra, Technical Director Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR); and
- Kurt Molholm, Administrator, Defense Technical Information Center.

Each of the panelists discussed in detail his or her agency's/organization's existing program for retaining digital information.

A second panel, composed of responsible parties and key stakeholders, included representatives from:

- the National Agricultural Library -- Pamela Q.J. André, Director;
- the research community -- represented by Bruce Wiersma, Dean, College of Natural Resources, Forestry, and Agriculture, University of Maine;
- the Government Printing Office -- Wayne Kelley, Superintendent of Documents, and
- the National Archives and Records Administration -- Thomas Brown, Chief, Archival Services Branch, Center for Electronic Records.

NAL Director Pam André set the context for the panel by talking about NAL's mission, its progress to date in preservation efforts, and its challenge in preserving electronic formats. Bruce Wiersma provided the user research perspective, with examples from his own and graduate student's work.

Wayne Kelley, Superintendent of Documents, GPO, discussed the mission for the Federal Depository Library Program and the strategic plan for transition to a more electronic depository program. He also discussed a study on the assessment of agency plans and standards for creation and dissemination of electronic information products; depository program authority; and USDA publications in the depository program (current counts and digital future).

Tom Brown, Chief, Archival Services Branch, Center for Electronic Records, NARA, noted that over 1,000 automated information systems are creating and processing information of permanent value, including 29 automated information systems within USDA. NARA's strategic plan includes the commitment to develop and refine standards for a distributed system that allows physical custody of archival material, particularly, electronic records material, outside of its facilities when feasible. Part of the implementation of the plan is a dialogue with Federal agencies and NARA's constituents on a wide range of records management issues, which includes a complete review of NARA's guidance to agencies on electronic records.

At the end of the first day, Paul Uhlir led a plenary discussion of models and issues in digital records retention and provided participants with homework to prepare them for the task of the second day. The first day set the stage for work ahead by providing models and perspectives of responsible parties and key stakeholders. The second day was devoted to action. Participants were assigned to one of four breakout groups, which met all morning, to address a range of questions on a given issue in order to work toward drafting a preservation action plan. The following elements of a plan were discussed in some detail:

- the management framework and related institutional roles and responsibilities, both inside the Department and externally, in the long-term preservation of digital USDA publications;

- the underlying technological infrastructure and technical document management requirements;
- the development of long-term retention criteria and processes for digital USDA publications; and
- the main issues in long-term user access to and retrieval of those digital publications.

The afternoon was devoted to breakout group report results and a plenary discussion of the elements of a national plan. Based on the results of this recent meeting, an initial preservation plan will be developed over the next few months for discussion within the Department. This preliminary plan will identify what needs to be done in the near term as well as over an extended period of time, the principal USDA agencies involved, and the resources required. It will serve as a discussion draft for obtaining commitment and support to proceed with this important initiative.

Project Consultant Paul Uhlir will now discuss the results of the conference.