

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20250

December 21, 1998

SECRETARY'S MEMORANDUM 4090-2

USDA CONFLICT MANAGEMENT POLICY STATEMENT

1 PURPOSE

This memorandum implements the recommendation in the Civil Rights Action Team report that USDA issue a policy on managing conflict in the workplace. This policy is also issued pursuant to the Administrative Dispute Resolution Act of 1996, Pub. L. 104-320, 110 Stat 3870 (1996), codified at 5 U.S.C. 571 et seq.

2 BACKGROUND

To ensure that USDA is an organization that values and respects its employees and customers, we must significantly improve our approach to managing conflict. USDA employees -- particularly managers and supervisors -- must be skilled at communicating effectively and resolving disputes in a positive manner. Effective conflict management also requires that conflict be addressed early. This can foster respectful and productive discussions, resolution of the underlying issues, and improved morale and productivity.

Inevitably, some disputes can be resolved only with the intervention of a third party. Several USDA agencies offer employees alternative dispute resolution (ADR) outside the established complaint systems as an option for resolving disputes without giving up legal rights. Mediation and other ADR techniques can be effective tools in managing workplace conflict. By increasing the use of ADR, we can expect to see more satisfactory resolutions to disputes in an informal setting, frequently in less time and at less cost than in the established complaint systems.

3 POLICY

- a USDA workplace conflict will be addressed early and in a positive manner.
- b USDA employees, particularly managers and supervisors, will be trained in communication and other conflict management skills.
- c USDA employees will make appropriate use of ADR techniques to resolve workplace disputes, especially in the early stages of conflict.

4 RESPONSIBILITIES

- a Agency Heads will:
 - (1) Ensure that all managers and supervisors receive training to achieve a basic level of competency in conflict management skills;
 - (2) Educate all employees about the conflict management and ADR services and programs available to employees and, to the extent possible, provide employees with training in conflict management skills;
 - (3) Make ADR processes that are informal, non-adversarial, and voluntary available as an option for all employees to use in appropriate disputes;
 - (4) Establish and maintain a cadre of skilled conflict resolution specialists who can assist other USDA employees in resolving workplace conflicts, through ADR techniques, outside the traditional dispute resolution systems.

- b The Assistant Secretary for Administration, through the Department's new Conflict Prevention and Resolution Center, will:
- (1) Lead the implementation of the Department's conflict management program. This includes such responsibilities as establishing core conflict management competencies for managers, coordinating conflict management training, developing minimum standards for and coordinating the use of conflict resolution specialists throughout the Department, and evaluating the success of the Department's conflict management efforts;
 - (2) Issue more detailed guidance to Agency Heads within 45 days of the issuance of this policy.

5 TERMINATION

This Memorandum shall remain in effect for one year or until such earlier time as the Department publishes regulations or other directives incorporating the provisions of this Memorandum.


SECRETARY OF AGRICULTURE