



United States
Office of Government Ethics
1201 New York Avenue, NW., Suite 500
Washington, DC 20005-3917

March 27, 2013

Stuart Bender
Designated Agency Ethics Official
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Whitten Building, Room 347-W
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Mr. Bender:

The United States Office of Government Ethics (OGE) has conducted a follow-up review of the ethics program at the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to determine how the two recommendations and two suggestions from our November 2012 report have been addressed.

OGE recommended that USDA complete the transition to electronic filing in the public financial disclosure program. In January 2013, the Secretary of Agriculture informed OGE that USDA completed the transition to 100 percent electronic filing for all public financial disclosure reports and for all periodic transactions reports required by the Stop Trading on Congressional Knowledge (STOCK) Act.¹ OGE considers this action responsive to the recommendation. Therefore, the recommendation is closed.

OGE recommended that USDA establish a plan to improve the timeliness of confidential financial disclosure filing for those agencies and offices serviced by Office of Ethics-Headquarters. The Secretary of Agriculture informed OGE that mandatory electronic financial disclosure filing was expanded to include USDA's approximately 16,000 confidential financial disclosure filers. OGE considers this action responsive to the recommendation. Therefore, the recommendation is closed.

OGE suggested that USDA assess the expansion of electronic filing in the confidential financial disclosure system and assess the confidential financial disclosure system within the Office of Ethics branch offices. The USDA addressed both suggestions with the expansion of electronic confidential financial disclosure filing to the agencies and offices serviced by the Office of Ethics-Headquarters. OGE considers this to be responsive to both suggestions. Therefore, the suggestions are closed.

¹ Pub. L. 112-105, S. 2038, 126 Stat. 291, enacted April 4, 2012.

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Based on OGE's follow-up, we have determined that the USDA has adequately addressed all four recommendations and suggestions from the November 2012 report.

Finally, as discussed in our report, OGE commends the Secretary for his leadership to enhance the importance and visibility of USDA's ethics program by establishing the ethics office as a separate entity within the Office of General Counsel. We trust that USDA senior leadership will continue to demonstrate strong support for the ethics office. We note, however, that since the issuance of the report, three senior positions on the ethics team have become vacant, resulting in a staffing level of 24 employees. This is a reduction of 12 employees over the last several years. We will continue to monitor the ethics program at USDA.

Thank you for your assistance during the follow-up process. Please contact me at 202-482-9317 if you require any additional information.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Rashmi Bartlett". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized initial "R".

Rashmi Bartlett
Chief, Professional Staff Group 1
Program Review Branch
Compliance Division