USDA Today

Meeting Georgia’s 21st Century Needs
on May 15, 1862, President Abraham Lincoln signed legislation establishing the United States Department of Agriculture. Two and a half years later, in what would be his final annual message to Congress, Lincoln called USDA “The People’s Department” based on its ability to touch the lives of every American, every day.

“USDA provides many programs and services,” says Davina Lee, regional office director of USDA’s Risk Management Agency (RMA). “We provide leadership on food, agriculture, natural resources, rural development and nutrition based on public policy. USDA as a whole is responsible for ensuring rural communities across America survive and thrive economically and socially. For farmers, we have many programs that provide education, a strong farm safety net, and support smart conservation practices in Georgia and nationwide.”

Local Support for Georgia Agriculture
The front door for accessing many USDA programs and benefits is the Farm Service Agency (FSA). Tasked with overseeing programs that primarily fall into one of these areas: disaster, conservation, price support, safety net and loans, in 2017, FSA pumped about $1 billion into Georgia’s agricultural economy. “Many farmers must obtain a farm serial number in order to apply for many USDA programs,” says Tas Smith, state executive director for USDA’s FSA in Georgia. “Farmers must start with their local Farm Service Agency in obtaining a farm serial number along with meeting other eligibility requirements. Farm Service Agency has a primary role in USDA in providing financial assistance to farmers and ranchers growing agriculture crops and livestock commercially.”

Through various organizational structures through the years, FSA has continued its mission to provide farmers with a strong safety net through administration of farm commodity programs.

“The agency provides credit to agricultural producers who are unable to receive private, commercial credit,” Smith says. “FSA places special emphasis on providing loans to beginning, minority and women farmers.”

Perhaps a lesser-known service provided by FSA are youth loans. In 2018, the Fort Valley Farm Loan Office loaned James McNeal, a 7th grader at Mossy Creek Middle School in Houston County, money to buy a cow. “Even though James is limited in mobility, that challenge has not stopped him in pursuing his goals in life,” Smith says. “In purchasing the cow, the youth loan is teaching James about financial responsibility. The cow will be exhibited in various cattle shows, and this will also help James in gaining more independence.”

Serving the Needs of the 21st Century Farmer
Another vital piece of the farm safety net is the Risk Management Agency, which administers federal crop insurance. The program began in response to the Dust Bowl in 1938. Since then, crop insurance has provided the support U.S. farmers and ranchers need to stay in business year after year. “For the past eight decades it has proven its value to farmers time and again,” Lee says. “We saw a huge need for it last year with the devastation from Hurricane Irma and other natural disasters.”

When federal crop insurance began, only wheat coverage was available and only in certain parts of the country. Today, farmers in all 50 states and Puerto Rico participate in the program. “There are over 550 crops and types that can be covered, and about 90 percent of our country’s principle croplands are federally insured,” Lee says. “What began as an experiment in response to a disaster many decades ago has become such an integral part of the farm safety net, strengthening American agriculture and farming communities.”

Farmers who purchase federal crop insurance must be in compliance with conservation programs administered by the Farm Service Agency (FSA) and the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) in order to be eligible for premium support. The subsidized insurance program can pay anywhere from 38 percent of a farmer’s premium up to 100 percent.

“Through continued research and an evolution of services that keep up with the changing needs of the people and the land, USDA continues to empower the 2 percent of Americans that feed 100 percent of our country and many more around the world,” says Terrance Rudolph, state conservationist for USDA’s NRCS. “NRCS does that by focusing on the land’s needs and marries them with sound science and the landowner’s objectives. While our services have evolved since the Dust Bowl, when we focused just on soil conservation, we still continue to offer 100 percent voluntary assistance to those who want to be a better manager of their natural resources.”

Helping Georgia Farmers Plan for the Future
Ultimately, being a better manager of one’s natural resources is all about the numbers, and that’s where USDA’s National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) comes in. “We’re the ones who publish official estimates and reports on all the commodities,” explains Jim Ewing, regional director of NASS’s Southern Region Field Office. “Our data are used to provide information or used to develop ag policy, which the other agencies then use to carry out their programs. We put out over 400 reports every year.”
On a national level, statistics from NASS are used to inform allocation of resources via the Farm Bill. Closer to home, a Georgia cotton farmer can use the NASS data to decide whether to expand their cotton acres or plant less cotton, for example. The March Planting Intentions Report documents what producers across the country are thinking about doing, which can help inform that decision. If a farmer hasn’t locked in a price for his or her cotton, the report can also help inform the decision around when to do so.

“Our agency mission has been consistent over time and that mission is to provide timely, accurate and useful statistics in service to American agriculture,” Ewing says. “However, our methods and processes have changed over time, especially with new technology. We use satellite imagery now and collect data with iPads vs. pen and paper.”

Ewing encourages Georgia’s farmers and ranchers who are asked to participate in surveys to do so, as better data leads to better decisions. “All data submitted to us is kept strictly confidential,” he says. “We never share information with any other agency, and none of our published information can be traced back to an individual producer; everything is published at the aggregate level.

“We really appreciate all the hard work the farmers and ranchers in Georgia do, and we thank them for supporting our agency by reporting.”

Promoting Economic Growth
In addition to helping farmers and ranchers, there’s another USDA agency whose mission is to help rural areas develop and grow by offering federal assistance that improves the quality of life. Rural Development (RD) targets communities in need and can help with everything from upgrading a small city’s water and sewer capacity to help lure industry to building a library or police station and providing safe affordable housing to low-income families.

“In RD we provide loans and grants to rural areas to build economic opportunities and create jobs in these rural areas,” says Joyce White, RD’s state director of Georgia. “This administration has set aside $4 billion for water, waste and sewer (improvements), and that’s unprecedented.”

In 2009, RD provided West Point $6.3 million in combined loan and grant funding to upgrade its water treatment plant so the city could meet the needs of Kia. RD also gave the city a $10.6 million loan to build a fire station and buy a ladder fire truck, also part of the successful efforts to land the auto manufacturer in the small southwest Georgia city.

The City of Pavo, a small rural town in southwest Georgia, will benefit from a Water and Environmental Programs loan and grant totaling $2,675,000. The City has aging infrastructure with poor water service and water quality associated with old galvanized water lines – many installed in the 1930s. The proposed project will include the installation of new water lines, fire hydrants, and valves. A new 125,000-gallon elevated water storage tank will replace the original 40,000-gallon tank installed in the 1930s. The proposed project will include the installation of new water lines, fire hydrants, and valves. A new 125,000-gallon elevated water storage tank will replace the original 40,000-gallon tank from the early 1900s and will provide the recommended minimum 24 hours of water storage to the community. This will provide better support to the residents in case of emergency or fire.

There’s also a hotel on the river in Rome, which RD helped build that has proved so popular, it’s expanding by 65 rooms.

“That is what is most important to us, putting people to work,” White says. “We can build a business; we can help an entrepreneur start a business; and we can help expand a business. We can purchase equipment and machinery.

“USDA RD is the sixth largest bank in the U.S.”

How does all this economic development help rural communities? By providing the resources needed to build schools for an agricultural community’s children; helping an entrepreneur open a gas station or restaurant in town for the farmer or rancher to patronize; and by creating opportunities for young people to come home to.

“When the textile mills closed, there was nothing for these kids who went off to college to come home to,” White says. “We can also put a low-income family into safe, affordable housing, single-family and multi-family. We put 3,000 people a year in safe, affordable housing.”

The top three priorities of RD today:

• Address the opioid crisis in rural America by providing funding to community-based treatment options, such as funding for nonprofit treatment centers, counseling centers or rehabilitation facilities;
• Support projects to enhance or rebuild water and waste infrastructure; and
• Increase e-connectivity by expanding broadband access to students in rural Georgia.

“Everyone equates USDA with farming, and it’s about so much more,” White says. “It’s about rural America, too, creating jobs and economic opportunity.”

Team USDA – Where We Are Today
With all these moving pieces, last year USDA Secretary and former Georgia Gov. Sonny Perdue announced a reorganization of USDA. Part of the reorganization created a new administrative entity called “Farm Production and Conservation,” which houses the Farm Service Agency (FSA), NRCS and RMA. “OneUSDA is part of our efforts to ensure the USDA is the most effective, the most efficient, the most customer-focused department in the entire federal government,” Perdue says. “Our mission is to do right and feed everyone.”

OneUSDA is breaking down service silos and like pieces of a puzzle, each agency is working together to create smoother operations and better coordination.

“Two recent examples of Team USDA coming together to create success for our customers are with the national Soil Health campaign and disaster response,” Rudolph says. “The Soil Health campaign was a tremendous effort to take some of the lessons learned over the decades from exhaustive farming techniques and try to get back to our more sustainable roots. As a result, producers are realizing that they can create healthier farms that reduce inputs and increase yields. This campaign has been picked up by the department as its benefits really do span all our customers by helping them environmentally and economically, which helps the average consumer enjoy a more sustainable food supply.

“The second example is how last year, in response to several hurricanes, our respective agencies got together to conduct some intensive outreach to make sure our customers had a clear understanding of what services we offered and how to make better use of them,” Rudolph continued. “Many of the producers, such as peach and pecan growers, and forest landowners affected have rebounded from those storms and have moved ahead due to the assistance they received from USDA.”
Online Resources

There’s even a new website, Farmers.gov, a one-stop-shop for disaster assistance or answers to questions about how best to manage natural resources. While USDA.gov offers all resources online, Farmers.gov is mobile friendly, highly visual and there are no government acronyms or confusing jargon.

“It is critical that our USDA agencies look to meet the customers service needs of all producers,” FSA’s Smith says. “From customers who want the traditional personal interaction with our county staff, to the producers to which customer service means accessing the latest technology to access our programs and services, we must continue to look for ways to meet the demands and needs of today’s agriculture producer.

“The launch of Farmers.gov will provide customers with online self-service applications, education materials on programs and services, engagement opportunities, and business tools to increase efficiency and productivity while preserving and fostering long-held traditional relationships between local USDA offices and producers.”

When Lincoln coined the USDA as “The People’s Department,” about half of all Americans lived on farms, compared with about 2 percent today. But, through its work on food, agriculture, economic development, science, natural resource conservation and a host of other issues, USDA has impacted the lives of generations of Americans.

Moving ahead, USDA will continue building on its successes to provide the best services possible to the state’s farmers and ranchers. Below are the contacts for Team USDA in Georgia.

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