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United States Senate
COMMITTEE ON SMALL BUSINESS
WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6350

May 9, 2001

The Honorable Ann Veneman
Secretary of Agriculture
Department of Agriculture
14th Street and Independence Avenue SW, # 200-A
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Madame Secretary:

We are disturbed by reports of agencies failing to implement small business procurement programs by providing their acquisition staffs with inadequate direction and training. By this letter we are inquiring as to the state of acquisition training at the Department of Agriculture (USDA). Similar letters are being sent to all civilian agencies that, in Fiscal 1999, did more than ten thousand contract actions of sufficient size to require individual reporting of those actions on Standard Form 279 (SF 279).

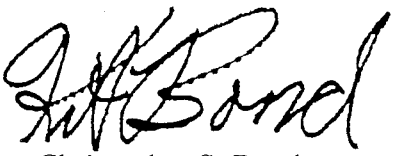
In 1996, the Congress adopted the Federal Acquisition Reform Act, commonly referred to as the Clinger-Cohen Act. That Act amended the Office of Federal Procurement Policy (OFPP) Act to require the head of each civilian agency, after consulting with the OFPP Administrator, to adopt "policies and procedures for the effective management (including accession, education, training, career development, and performance incentives) of the acquisition workforce of the agency." On September 12, 1997, the OFPP Administrator promulgated Policy Letter 97-01 to implement this provision, calling on agencies to adopt the required policies and procedures by May 1, 1998. By this time, USDA has had sufficient time to implement this requirement.

Training of acquisition personnel is urgently needed. The Federal Acquisition Personnel Information System indicates that about half of the Federal government's acquisition workforce will be eligible for retirement within this decade or sooner. USDA will find it increasingly difficult to attract and retain contracting staff if it does not provide proper training. Most applicants will not want to be left exposed to personal and agency liability for lapses in compliance with contracting requirements and will tend to avoid positions at such an agency. It is also worth noting that the General Accounting Office (GAO) has recently added "human capital management" to its "high risk" areas for special monitoring.

Please provide your responses to the attached questions not later than June 15, 2001. If you have questions about this letter, please contact Cordell Smith (Chairman Bond) or John DaSilva (Ranking Member Kerry) of the Senate Small Business Committee staff on (202)224- .

Sincerely,

John F. Kerry
Ranking Member



Christopher S. Bond
Chairman

Questions concerning Department of Agriculture (USDA) implementation of acquisition personnel training requirements

[1] Section 37(b)(1) of the Office of Federal Procurement Policy Act (OFPP Act), adopted February 10, 1996, requires each civilian agency to adopt "policies and procedures for the effective management (including accession, education, training, career development, and performance incentives) of the acquisition workforce of the agency." OFPP Policy Letter 97-01 required such policies and procedures to be adopted by May 1, 1998. Please provide copies of the policies and procedures adopted by USDA under this section. Indicate what portions of these policies and procedures were adopted by May 1, 1998.

[2] Section 37(f) of the OFPP Act requires the heads of all civilian agencies to prepare career paths, training requirements, and performance incentives for each category of acquisition personnel identified at section 37(g)(1)(A). Please provide copies of the career paths, training requirements, and performance incentives for each category of acquisition personnel. If this information is included in your response to question [1], please specify where that information may be found in that submission.

[3] For each category of acquisition personnel identified at section 37(g)(1)(A) of the OFPP Act:

[a] how many USDA personnel are covered?
[b] how many USDA personnel referred to in [a] have completed the training requirements?
[c] how many USDA personnel referred to in [a] have completed more than 50% but not all of the training requirements?

[4] Section 37(c) of the OFPP Act vests authority to carry out the directions of the head of each agency, with respect to the OFPP Act's requirements, in the Senior Procurement Executive. Who is USDA's current Senior Procurement Executive? Please identify each person who has held this position since February 10, 1996, and the term that person served, if more than one person has held this position.

[5] Section 220 of Office of Management and Budget Circular A-11 states that agencies should include performance goals such as recruitment, retention, skill development and training, and appraisals linked to program performance, as part of their annual performance plans. Will USDA include such program goals in its Fiscal 2002 performance plan?

Please provide your responses to these questions not later than June 15, 2001. If you have questions concerning these inquiries, please contact Cordell Smith (Chairman Bond) or John DaSilva (Ranking Member Kerry) of the Senate Small Business Committee staff on (202)224-