

USDA *news*

USDA's Employee News Publication—For You & About You!

How We Helped Each Other, In The Aftermath Of Hurricane Katrina

by Ron Hall
Office of Communications

When a natural disaster hits, USDA initiates a full response to help disaster victims in a variety of ways. No matter how severe the disaster, that's all part of our vast mission. So USDA employees responded following such disasters as the Loma Prieta Earthquake in 1989, the "Great Flood of '93," and Hurricanes Rita and Wilma this year.

But one of the particularly distinguishing features of Hurricane Katrina, which wreaked havoc on the Gulf Coast region on August 29, was its effect on the lives, jobs, and property of USDA employees residing in that region. What follows is a focus on how employees helped employees—as well as others—in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.

One of the Department's initial responses, to help its employees living in the affected areas, was to set up a phone bank to take calls from a previously-established 24-hour toll-free USDA Hotline. According to **Jim Redington**, USDA's director of emergency programs, located within the Office of Operations, a key purpose of the phone bank and Hotline was to locate USDA employees who were reported as missing because of the hurricane, as well as to provide them a venue to ask questions about how the storm might affect such matters as their

place of employment, getting paid, and other vital matters.

Employees were asked to volunteer to staff this Hotline. And, working out of USDA's Emergency Operations Center at USDA headquarters in Washington, DC, they did so, in a variety of shifts beyond normal working hours.

Jaime Adams, a confidential assistant in the Grain Inspection, Packers and Stockyards Administration, handled a number of incoming calls from employees with USDA's National Finance Center in New Orleans.

"All of us on the Hotline," she said, "wanted to get each USDA caller to tell us if they were all right, if their families or friends were okay as well, if they were in touch with any other USDA employees, and if they could provide a good followup contact phone number. And we also tried to put their minds at ease about their employment status by making sure they knew that, at that point in time, they were on administrative leave status."

"We provided an outlet for employees to talk to someone, cry with someone, vent with someone, and share their burdens with someone. And we 'someones' were live human beings—so that kept their messages for help from being trapped in a voice mail somewhere."

Rob Huttenlocker, director of the Compliance Review Staff with the Foreign Agricultural Service, said, "One of my calls involved a person from Connecticut who was trying to reach his mother. He had put out an 'I'm looking for this person' message on the Red Cross Website. His



"Jesse, if you check the block for 'Eat more fruits and vegetables,' then you can steam 'em, stir-fry 'em, stew 'em, and even prepare 'em as a dessert," exhorts **Shannon Jones** (center), an FNS regional nutritionist with the agency's Southwest Region in Dallas. She and FNS financial management specialist **Elise Alvidrez** (right) are giving some suggestions to FNS public affairs specialist **Jesse Garcia**, as he fills out his "HealthierME contract." This is one of several creative initiatives that USDA employees around the country have come up with recently to keep well-fed and fit. Note **Krystyna Frolich's** story on page 4.—PHOTO BY TERRI ROMINE-ORTEGA

mother, an NFC employee, was on our list of missing employees."

"He said he'd finally located his mother at a temporary residence in Texas, and that, while he was trying to get her to get to Connecticut and stay with him for awhile, all *she* was talking about was getting back to work. So the man said to me, 'Would you please tell my mother that she doesn't need to be thinking of going back to work right now!'"

Pat Zohfeld, a program technician with the Food and Nutrition Service's Midwest Regional Office in Chicago, staffed a similar Hotline—but it was run by the Federal Emergency Management Agency. "We got a memo from our regional administrator," she said, "asking for volunteers to staff that hotline."

Joe Minniti, FNS's disaster coordinator for that region, noted the memo said "Volunteers [who] speak Cajun, French or Spanish are

especially needed. This... will be grueling and emotionally draining and mostly sedentary at a small desk with a computer and phone."

Zohfeld said that, "I helped callers know what assistance was available from such agencies as FEMA and the Small Business Administration. I arranged to send packets of forms so they could apply for various forms of assistance—and those packets would be sent to the requesters at their temporary location or to a friend or relative. Then I'd give them a special FEMA help-desk number so they could check on the progress of their claims."

On the same day that Katrina hit the Gulf Coast region, **Mike O'Connor**, OO's "Be Prepared" webmaster, developed and then posted on the Internet USDA's "Katrina Website"—www.usda.gov.

continued on pg. 2...



Mike Johanns *Secretary of Agriculture*

Dear Fellow Employees,
We have all seen the images of destruction left in the wake of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita and most recently Hurricane Wilma.

After seeing the devastation in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas first-hand, I can tell you that it is absolutely unbelievable. Yet USDA stepped up in a magnificent way.

Many people lost their homes, their livelihoods, their possessions, their pets, and even their lives. But what has gone largely unreported is the heroic efforts of many people, including USDA employees, to help those afflicted by the storms. Regardless of job description, wherever USDA employees could help, they did.

To date, Forest Service Incident Management Teams have helped to provide more than 600,000 people with food supplies, including nearly three million meals, four million gallons of water, and 40 million pounds of ice.

In Louisiana and Texas alone, more than 428,000 displaced households were approved for \$151 million in food stamp benefits. In addition, more than 15 million pounds of commodities and baby food have been ordered for affected states.

The Rural Development mission area has placed almost 8,000 evacuees in about 2,600 RD-financed homes and multi-family housing units in 34 states and provided more than 18,000 families with temporary loan forbearance agreements on their mortgage payments. Employees also assisted displaced residents in completing forms for federal aid

with wireless Internet laptops.

In New Orleans, Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service employees used air and flat-bottom boats to take more than 300 people to safety as well as close to 10,000 animals, including pets and livestock. Many of the animals were treated by APHIS veterinarians who also assisted with the rescue of 8 dolphins from the waters surrounding Biloxi, Miss. APHIS even rescued mice, at Tulane University, which are vital to cancer research and the culmination of years of work by scientists at the school. In Texas, APHIS evacuated about 20,000 pets and 10,000 large animals, mostly horses. The majority have been returned to their owners, while the remainder are in shelters operated by humane animal care organizations.

The Natural Resources Conservation Service used its National Cartography and Geospatial Center to help identify the best areas for animal debris disposal and burial that will not endanger water sources. The Federal Emergency Management Agency provided authority and \$10 million to NRCS for the disposal of hundreds of animal carcasses including more than six million birds.

I want to thank everyone who played a role in hurricane response. Many USDA employees set aside their personal losses to carry out official duties, both maintaining vital USDA operations and responding to external need. I have heard countless stories of USDA employees rolling up their sleeves and applying ingenuity to deliver aid to fellow Americans. I applaud all those who have gone above and beyond the call of duty. I could not be more proud to be your Secretary. ■

How We Helped...continued from pg. 1

gov/oo/beprepared/katrinaaftermath.htm

"I developed it," he explained, "to provide vital federal, state, local, and USDA agency-specific emergency preparedness information to USDA employees in those areas socked by the storm."

"I wanted to provide an easy-to-reach, single point of reference for our employees to access, to aid in their recovery efforts," he emphasized.

Ed Plourde, a computer programmer with the Rural Development mission area in Montpelier, Vt., worked on a related website, as part of a private sector initiative called the "Katrina Data Project." With the permission of his supervisor, he volunteered to help develop the web site—www.katrinadataproject.com—which is a central clearinghouse, on the Internet, containing names and addresses of Katrina evacuees.

"Two types of individuals access this site," he explained. "People listed as Katrina evacuees and people trying to locate those evacuees."

According to data on that website, to date its listings have resulted in over 3,400 matches.

The Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service's **Paula Henstridge** said she saw a lot of e-mail traffic from a number of retired APHIS employees—living in the affected area and elsewhere around the country. "They were checking on each other from all over the place," she said.

Secretary **Mike Johanns** sent a memorandum, dated Sept. 8, 2005, to USDA employees, in which he noted that, "Many employees have asked how

they can help their Gulf Coast co-workers. On an official basis, USDA [is launching] two initiatives through which you can lend a hand..."

The memo then provided details about those two initiatives: (1) a USDA-wide "Emergency Leave Transfer Program," and (2) an option in which Departmental employees could designate Combined Federal Campaign donations for the relief of USDA employees affected by Katrina.

According to **Patty Moore**, USDA's Leave Administrator, located within the Office of Human Capital Management, as of October 28, 2005, USDA employees nationwide have donated 19,796 hours of annual leave as part of the Emergency Leave Transfer program.

In addition to donations of annual leave and CFC contributions, employees at headquarters and field locations set up collection points for donations of items to be sent to victims of Katrina. For instance, USDA employee organizations in the Washington, DC metropolitan area established drop boxes at various office locations to collect school supplies to assist Katrina-affected students who had been temporarily evacuated to the DC area.

According to **Pat Murphy**, an information technology specialist with the Farm Service Agency who coordinated that overall effort, "We knew our employees were doing a lot to help out victims of Katrina—but we wanted to make sure that some help was also going to kids."

At the same time that USDA employees were

assisting fellow employees and others affected by Katrina, other employees were helping to get USDA facilities up and running that had been knocked out of commission by the storm.

For instance, the largest individual USDA facility impacted by Katrina was the three buildings which constitute NFC, part of the Office of the Chief Financial Officer, in New Orleans. It employs over 1,400 employees and handles a large part of the federal payroll. "We make electronic bank deposits for over 560,000 federal employees, and over 132 federal departments and agencies, in both the executive and legislative branches of government," noted **Penny Forbes**, associate director of payroll operations at NFC.

NFC telecommunications specialist **Tom Lutman** pointed out that NFC sits below sea level and borders an intracoastal waterway at New Orleans. "But we were prepared, with a Continuity of Operations Plan and backup facilities, for emergency situations," he affirmed.

So, as Katrina approached, NFC employees prepared for early payroll processing, and many relocated to various alternate worksites around the country. Those sites ultimately included the Office of the Chief Information Officer's National Information Technology Center in Kansas City, Mo., USDA facilities in Alexandria, La., and Rosslyn, Va., and commercial facilities in Philadelphia, Atlanta, and Grand Prairie, Texas.

Kathleen Rundle, associate CIO and director
continued on pg. 6...

Notes *from USDA Headquarters*

The weather and farm bill forums have dominated activities at USDA headquarters in the past two months. In late September, Secretary **Mike Johanns** traveled to Louisiana and Mississippi to meet with employees and producers. He and Deputy Secretary **Chuck Conner** and several Sub Cabinet members also continued farm bill listening sessions. USDA has now held sessions in 42 states, and 19 of the sessions were hosted by Secretary Johanns personally.

Although the forums will continue until the end of the year, in October the Secretary outlined what he has been hearing from farmers after nearly 57 hours of listening. In addition, the Secretary spent several days in Europe at World Trade Organization negotiations where he pressed our export competitors to improve access to their markets for U.S. farm products.

What Farmers Are Saying:

"We are beginning to see patterns in the responses. There seems to be consensus among producers and other stakeholders on some policies—and a definite diversity of opinion about others," Secretary Johanns told a Washington, DC audience.

Areas where there is agreement include:

- **Rural Development.** "Our contributions to everything from new water systems to hospitals are clearly appreciated. President **Bush's** leadership in rural development is clearly making a difference in the lives of rural residents."
- **Conservation.** "We have also heard tremendous support for another of the President's priorities—conservation. Our cooperative conservation programs provide farmers and

ranchers with financial support, while benefiting the whole of society by protecting our natural resources today and for future generations."

- **Competitiveness.** "We've heard a lot about the importance of competitiveness and opening doors to new and expanded markets for U.S. agricultural products. Farmers and ranchers believe in trade, but they believe it must be fair trade, and I share their view. Producers understand that more than one-quarter of farm cash receipts come from trade."

Areas where there is a diversity of opinion:

- "We are hearing a range of opinions when it comes to our farm support programs. Some predicted that all we would hear is a desire for more of the same. We have heard that, but clearly we have also heard from producers advocating for change. Responses vary by region of the country and by program. For example, in the Midwest many are urging stronger payment limits, yet in the South, there is strong opposition to that idea. There is also concern about farm payments being capitalized into increased land values."
- "Another message I am consistently hearing is from small and minority farmers who are expressing frustration about the lion's share of federal farm support being focused on large operations."

Additional impetus for change comes from the World Trade Organization decision against the farm bill's Step 2 program for cotton. Johanns said, "add to that the potential challenge to our rice program and Canada's investigation into our corn program, and you can understand why I



Secretary **Mike Johanns** (left) discusses recovery operations in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina with **Bobby Garrett** (second from left), a Rural Development manager based at the USDA Service Center in Corinth, Miss., and **Frank Brinkley**, a Rural Development manager based at the USDA Service Center in Tupelo, Miss. Working out of the Federal Emergency Management Agency's Disaster Recovery Center set up in Waveland, Miss., they are assisting a woman who is filling out a "Letter of Priority Entitlement"—a first step before she can temporarily relocate into a vacant RD-financed multi-family housing unit.—**PHOTO BY TERRI TEUBER**

describe the current farm bill as perhaps the most high-risk approach we could take for our nation's farmers and ranchers in the future."

Whatever the outcome of the WTO negotiations Johanns said, "we must become more inclusive and effective in the delivery of support to our farmers and ranchers. I have long-argued that investing in agriculture is a very smart choice for America, and today I feel more strongly than ever about the importance of that investment."

National School Lunch Week:

In October, USDA officials celebrated the success of the National School Lunch program, which feeds 29 million children each day. In addition, schools that participate in the **HealthierUS** School Challenge were honored. Those schools meet voluntary nutrition and physical activity standards set by USDA. As part of the week-long

celebration, USDA officials also encouraged students, parents and teachers to utilize **MyPyramid.gov** and **MyPyramid for Kids** to help fight obesity. MyPyramid for Kids provides dietary guidance through an interactive computer game and classroom lesson plans.

Energy Conservation:

Secretary Johanns has asked all USDA employees to help conserve energy due to the effects of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita on the nation's energy infrastructure and supplies. Because the federal government is the largest user of energy in the nation, Secretary Johanns asks that we turn off lights when leaving a room; turn off computer monitors and printers when not in use; in areas of sufficient daylight, turn off electric lights; carpool or use public transportation to get to work; and use alternative fuels when possible.

—**PATRICIA KLINTBERG**

Employees *make these things happen*

Food Safety

For 20 Years Now We've Handled Calls

The year 1985 saw Halley's Comet streaking across the sky. During that year the top TV program was "Dynasty," followed closely by "Dallas." Microwave popcorn was introduced.

And USDA's Meat and Poultry Hotline began serving the public on July 1, 1985.

"During the last 20 years, over two million people have called the Hotline," noted **Susan Conley**, director of the Food Safety and Inspection Service's Food Safety Education Staff, where the Hotline is located. "People today are more aware of food safety issues than they were in the 1980s—and I firmly believe the Hotline has played a major part in that."

For instance, two decades ago—before the Internet and e-mail evolved—most Americans had never heard of E. coli O157:H7. "But," pointed out **Diane Van**, FSIS's manager of the Hotline, "now many are knowledgeable about other bacteria that can cause foodborne illness—such as Salmonella, Campylobacter, and Listeria."

Kathy Bernard, special projects manager of the Hotline, explained that when calls are received, the Hotline's eight FSIS food safety specialists assess the caller's knowledge of food safety and then provide appropriate guidance. Callers can telephone, toll-free, at 1-888-MPHotline from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Eastern time Monday through Friday.

"We talk callers through possibly difficult or puzzling situations," she noted. "That may help them choose the safest food-handling alternatives—and reduce the risk of foodborne illness."

In addition, in an emergency situation, such as an outbreak of foodborne illness, a power outage, a natural disaster, or a food product recall, the Hotline can offer vital information to consumers in a timely manner.

Hotline food safety specialist **Olga Catter** said that in 2002 the Hotline extended its service by adding a Spanish-speaking specialist. Now there are two, with the addition of food safety specialist **Maribel Alonso**.

Then in 2004 FSIS unveiled "Ask Karen," a 'virtual representative' automated response system available 24/7 at the agency's website—www.fsis.usda.gov. "No, she's not a dating service," quipped Hotline home economist **CiCi Williamson**. "She" displays an answer—based on the words typed by users of this feature—to almost 7,000 questions about the safe storage, preparation, and handling of meat, poultry, and egg products, as well as about the prevention of foodborne illness and disease."

Hotline dietitian **Eileen Dykes** pointed out that the agency's website also contains hundreds of food safety publications for consumers. In addition, questions can be posed using the Hotline's e-mail address: MPHotline.fsis@usda.gov

Hotline food safety specialist **Marilyn Johnston** said that, over the past 20 years, about 82 percent of the callers to the Hotline have been consumers. "The largest number of calls come from California, but callers in the Eastern time zone have made up the majority of those two million calls," she added.

Hotline food technologist **Archie Magoulas** said that during Hurricanes Katrina and Rita callers from the affected Gulf Coast areas mainly asked questions about how to cope, food safety-wise, with power outages. "The complication," he advised, "is that, since the phone lines and many of the area's cell-phone towers were knocked out, residents generally couldn't make the calls to us."

Hotline home economist **Sandy King** said

November and December are the top two months for the Hotline's call volume. "And that's been the time when we've received our 'most unique inquiries'," she observed.

For instance, one caller didn't have an oven cooking bag, so she roasted her turkey in a dry cleaning sack. "It melted all over the turkey, which chemically contaminated it," King recounted. "We told her she had to throw it away."

Another caller thawed her frozen turkey in her toilet, flushing it every 30 minutes to "change the water." "I think you know what advice we gave her," King said.

But then there was the caller—a self-described non-cook—from Hawaii. Williamson, who had taken that call on the Hotline, talked the caller through his Thanksgiving dinner preparation for his cancer-stricken wife who was coming out of the hospital for the holiday. "Later," she said, "the man wrote us that his wife had died—but that the Hotline's help had created a beautiful memory of their last holiday together."

"You can't buy nice feedback like that."

—RON HALL



"Buenas tardes. En que puedo servirle?" inquires **Olga Catter**, a bilingual FSIS food safety specialist on USDA's Meat and Poultry Hotline. She is asking in Spanish how she might help yet another caller to the Hotline.—PHOTO BY CICI WILLIAMSON

Food, Nutrition, and Consumer Services

Sweating Can Lead To Sweet Success

Sometimes all it takes is some healthy competition and a friendly bet to encourage employees to not only 'talk the talk' but then to literally 'walk the walk' in reaching their fitness goals. For employees in two regional offices of the Food and Nutrition Service, the goals—and the competition—recently 'got personal.'

In February 2005 **Ollice Holden**, regional administrator of FNS's Midwest Region, based in Chicago, bet **Donald Arnett**, regional administrator of FNS's Southeast Region, based in Atlanta, that the Midwest Region's employees could best the Southeast Region's employees in a fitness competition.

The prizes? The Southeastern victors would receive Chicago-style deep-dish pizza, while Georgia-fresh peach cobbler would serve as the reward for victorious Midwesterners.

Accordingly, employees from the two regions tracked their physical activities from the first day of spring to the first day of summer by logging onto the "President's Challenge" physical fitness website—www.presidentschallenge.org—to record their daily actions.

Midwest Region Nutrition Coordinating Committee member **Kim Blum** said, "Each activity was assigned points based on its length and intensity." For instance, an hour of yoga earned 145 points, while moderately exercising on a car-

dio machine for 30 minutes earned 256 points.

Midwest Region Wellness coordinator **Julie Mikkelsen** was on her office's ten-person 'stair-climbing group.' Each time it met it added a floor for walking purposes. Her office is on the 20th floor, and ultimately the group made it up to the 25th floor. "And please point out that our walking was *up* the stairs, not *down* the stairs," she laughed—or maybe panted.

Tara Gleason, a program specialist in FNS's Columbus, Ohio field office, added that her favorite exercise was walking. Her least favorite exercise? Doing housework—"but at least I could earn points from all those chores that I absolutely dread," she quipped.

Editor's Roundup *USDA's people in the news*



Dave Combs is USDA's Chief Information Officer.

From July 2005 until his appointment to this position Combs served as acting CIO for USDA. He was USDA's acting deputy CIO from June 2004 to July 2005. From 2003-2004 he served as special assistant to [then] Chief Information Officer **Scott Charbo**. From 2002-2003 he was special assistant to [then] Rural Utilities Service Administrator **Hilda Legg**.

Before joining USDA, from 1992-2002 Combs served as the founder and owner of Combs Music, a Winston-Salem, N.C.-based independent record company specializing in instrumental piano music. He worked for AT&T from 1969-92 in Winston-Salem and Bethesda, Md., focusing on management responsibilities in such areas as information

technology and telecommunications sales management.

Charbo, the previous Chief Information Officer for USDA, is now the CIO at the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. ■



Scott Steele is USDA's Budget Officer and director of the Office of Budget and Program Analysis.

From 1986 until his selection for this position Steele served as OBPA's deputy director for program analysis, in charge of OBPA's analytical work related to USDA's budget, regulatory, and legislative actions. He has coordinated USDA's budget and programmatic analysis related to farm bill legislation for every farm bill dating back to the 1977 Act.

Steele began his federal career in 1970 as an economist with the Eco-

nomics Research Service. He later was an ERS research manager and then a senior policy analyst in the Office of the Secretary, before joining OBPA. During that time, from 1978-84 he also headed the U.S. Delegation to the Committee on World Food Security under the auspices of the Food and Agriculture Organization in the United Nations.

Steve Dewhurst, USDA's previous Budget Officer and director of OBPA, retired from that position following 39 years of federal service, including 37 years with USDA—and all of that was with OBPA. ■



Jerry Williams is USDA's Deputy Chief Information Officer.

Before joining USDA, from August 2004 until his selection for this position Williams

was acting Chief Information Officer for the U.S. Small Business Administration. Since July 2003 he was also the Deputy CIO for the SBA.

From 2000-2003 Williams was the chief of the Federal Financial Management Systems Branch at the Office of Management and Budget. He worked as a senior accountant with the Office of the Secretary of Defense at the Pentagon from 1990-2000. From 1986-90 he was the head of the Financial Systems Branch with the Naval Computers and Telecommunications Command in Washington, DC, after having been an auditor with the Naval International Logistics Control Office in Philadelphia from 1984-86. He began his federal career in 1984 as an auditor with the Department of the Navy in Cleveland.

Ira Hobbs, USDA's previous Deputy Chief Information Officer, is now the CIO at the U.S. Department of the Treasury. ■

FNS employees in the Southeast Region were equally positive. **Lisa Bragg**, an FNS accountant in Atlanta, said, "I was surprised at how many points I could get from my downhill skiing."

Ummm, downhill skiing—in Atlanta? "Oh, I went on vacation in Breckenridge, Colorado, and added up the points I earned from skiing down the Cimarron, Sizzler, and Pika Slopes."

David Adkins, the Southeast Region's Wellness coordinator, added that employees who didn't participate have expressed regret. "They vowed that they're going to participate in a future challenge. "And," he quipped, "they know that I know, you know?"

As the contest drew closer to the June 20 deadline, daily updates pushed each region ahead on different days. But with over one million points the Midwest Region finally won out, ahead of the 991,008 points earned by Southeast Region employees. And the peach cobbler arrived in Chicago on September 1.

Although other FNS regions didn't participate in the "peach cobbler versus deep-dish pizza wars," their employees have also come up with creative ways to keep well-fed and fit.

For instance, on one Friday in March, FNS employees with the Mid-Atlantic Region based in Robbinsville, N.J., dressed in pajamas and slippers for a "Breakfast in the Office" event. The Region's Wellness coordinator **Pat Cumiskey-**

Czeto, said, "Our employees wore crazy slippers and some had their hair in curlers, as we downed low-cal breakfast burritos, nutrition shakes, and low-cal fruit muffins."

Felicia Gaither, the Wellness coordinator for FNS's Mountain Plains Region based in Denver, described its "Colorado 14ers' Challenge." "We have 54 mountain peaks in Colorado which are at least 14,000 feet high," she explained. "So, as part of our fitness challenge, our employees had to climb the stairs in our nine-floor office building to see if they could reach the equivalent of one of the mountaintops."

It took 135 trips up those nine floors to reach the equivalent of Mount Elbert—the highest of those 54 mountain peaks. One employee ultimately made it to that height.

Julie Yee, the Wellness coordinator for FNS's Western Region based in San Francisco, reported that her region has created a website on its IntraNet that gives employees daily health, nutrition, and fitness tips.

In FNS's Southwest Region, based in Dallas, employees are so serious about keeping fit and healthy that they sign contracts—with themselves. Regional nutritionist **Shannon Jones** developed the contracts—"which hang in their cubicles," she explained. A typical contract—titled "HealthierME"—focuses on various health and physical activity options to check off.



"So this is what my life has come to: spoon-feeding these two chowhounds the peach cobbler we won from our colleagues in Atlanta," quips **Peggy Gau** (left), a personnel liaison with FNS's Midwest Regional Office in Chicago. Benefiting from Gau's reluctant TLC are FNS secretary **Pam Gray** (right) and Regional Food Stamp Director **Tim English**. —**PHOTO BY KIM PHILLIPS**

Finally employees with FNS's Northeast Region, based in Boston, have logged more than 30,000 miles in 'virtual' globe-trots to such locales as Cairo, Egypt and Papua, New Guinea. "For more than a year," noted regional nutritionist **Marilyn Myers**, "we collectively logged our physical activity miles onto our region's Workplace Wellness website that represented our travel to exotic countries."

"At the end of our collective 'journey,'" she noted, "we got some tea and held our own 'Boston Tea Party' to celebrate our 'travels'—and also Boston's win in the 2004 World Series."

—**KRYSTYNA FROLICH**



PROFILE PLUS *More About: Sam Shanklin*

Sam Shanklin works for USDA's Mobile Protection Unit in Washington, DC. He is sometimes the first employee to see the Secretary of Agriculture in the morning and the last employee to see him at night. He's the Secretary's senior driver.

That's just one of a remarkable variety of jobs that make up USDA. It employs about 100,000 people in over 300 occupations, including 4,210 soil conservationists, 2,793 foresters, 1,629 veterinarians, 1,325 civil engineers, 605 economists, 358 archaeologists, and 121 dietitians.

Still, some may wonder why a driver is necessary. The answer is "time." Every minute of the Secretary's day is scheduled and Secretary **Mike Johanns** likes to be early, if possible, for each event. With the tourist-bloated traffic in Washington DC, driving the Secretary or the Deputy Secretary requires extensive local knowledge of each possible destination, short cuts, road work, traffic light timing, and patience. When Congress is working on a farm bill, Shanklin has waited until the wee small hours of the morning to drive his charge back to the Department.

If the job is stressful Shanklin doesn't show it. A native of Alexandria, Va., he said two life-changing events help him keep things in perspective. First, at age 15, he began working after school at a funeral home. Though uneasy around the "customers," Shanklin had begun to settle in when one day the boss asked him to take a "customer" to the mortuary on the 3rd floor. So Shanklin dutifully wheeled the body bag-laden gurney into an old-fashioned elevator, which required him to pull a gate across the opening and depress a button to reach his destination. But on the way up the elevator got stuck between floors. At that moment the body on the gurney began to slowly sit up. "It was one of the funeral home workers. They knew I was scared of dead bodies," he said.

Secondly, as a young man Shanklin served in Pleiku, Vietnam at Camp Holloway, cooking for the U.S. Army's 52nd Combat Aviation Battalion. But Camp Holloway came under fire regularly, so when the CO wanted the cooks to wear whites instead of combat uniforms, Shanklin moved to the motor pool to be less of a target. "Between Vietnam and the funeral

home, I'm not scared of anything," he said.

With his service in the Army and his time at USDA, Sam has been a federal employee for 40 years and has little interest in retirement.

Consider that Mike Johanns is the nation's 28th Secretary of Agriculture. But he is Shanklin's 13th. When Shanklin began work at USDA's Post Office **Orville Freeman** was Secretary. After he had returned from Vietnam and transferred to the USDA motor pool, **Clifford Hardin** became Secretary. Later, Shanklin was a backup driver for Secretaries **Earl Butz**, **John Knebel**, **Bob Bergland**, and **John Block**. During Secretary Block's tenure, Shanklin drove for then-Deputy Secretary **Dick Lyng**. When Lyng became Secretary, Shanklin became his chief chauffeur after Lyng asked, tongue-in-cheek, "Do you know of any good drivers?"

Shanklin said Lyng had one peculiarity. "He didn't like heat. No matter how cold it was, I could not put the heater on in the car. So I bought leg warmers. His office was so cold you could have hung meat in it."

Some Secretaries bring their own drivers with them, like Secretary **Clayton Yeutter** and Secretary **Mike Espy**. But Shanklin drove for Secretary **Ed Madigan** and Secretary **Dan Glickman**. He said of Glickman: "He needed a ride to Capitol Hill for his confirmation hearing. He wasn't Secretary yet but I offered to take him and waited for him." The rest is history. Shanklin drove him for six years, for Secretary **Ann Veneman** for four years, and now gets Secretary Johanns where he needs to go.

Does he like his job? "I love it," he replied. "I get to meet people every day and I don't have to sit behind a desk."

Last Publication Read: Automobile magazine.

Last Movie Seen: "Ray." "I'm a Ray Charles fan. I bet I saw him in concert at least 20 times."

Hobbies: Bowling, photography, gardening, throwing cookouts, driving cross-country.

Favorite Food: Hamburger.

Favorite Weekend Breakfast: Waffles, bacon and eggs, coffee, and orange juice.

Priorities In The Months Ahead: "To get the Secretary and the Deputy Secretary from A to B safely and on time."

—PATRICIA KLINTBERG

How We Helped...continued from pg. 2

tor of OCIO's NITC in Kansas City, said "I deployed several NITC staff to Philadelphia, plus sent technical equipment to aid in restoration."

"NFC and NITC staff worked together to restore key systems in Philadelphia," Lutman pointed out. "And primary NFC services were available by the end of the week following the storm."

Forbes said that, from its alternate worksites, NFC employees processed payroll and time and attendance transactions for the federal departments it services. "Pay Period 16 was processed with no trouble," she pointed out. "But we did not mail out Earnings and Leave Statements for Pay Periods 16, 17, or 18." Those were accessible from the "Employee Personal Page" at <https://www.nfc.usda.gov/personal>.

"The bottom line: there was *no* disruption to the salary payments for our clients," Forbes noted.

When NFC's facilities were knocked out by the storm, that also affected the NFC Credit Union. "It's housed in the main NFC building," explained **Monique Price**, chief of NFC's Labor and Employee Relations Section. "So employees couldn't access their credit union accounts onsite. Also,

because of the storm, funds had not been posted to those employee credit union accounts."

"So I worked directly with **Matt Faulkner** to establish debit cards for employees who needed to get at their payroll funds," Price noted. Faulkner is the director of OCFO's Credit, Travel and Grants Policy Division.

Price explained that, once an employee would call in on NFC's toll-free employee contact number and advise that he/she did not receive his/her paycheck, she first personally verified identifying information to ensure authenticity. Then she created an individualized debit card and loaded, onto that card, the exact amount of that employee's missing paycheck. Then the appropriate servicing bank shipped the card, through overnight mail, to that individual employee—even at that employee's temporary location as appropriate.

"We created about 60 of these debit cards to help out our fellow NFC employees," she said. "Other USDA agencies, which also had employees affected by Katrina, used a similar debit card system, based on our success with this approach."

Jan Lilja, the associate chief information officer for telecommunications in OCIO, said that, in

addition to NFC, 85 USDA field Service Centers and four Agricultural Research Service field sites were initially closed due to the post-Katrina physical conditions in the Gulf Coast region. "Very large service areas were affected—and that included fixed line telephone service, high speed data circuits, commercial cellular service, and the Forest Service's private radio system," she explained. "So OCIO's Service Center technical staffers immediately sent Blackberries, laptop computers with wireless cards, or satellite phones to the field."

In fact, according to **Stuart Adler**, an OCIO management analyst, a USDA push to bring the affected offices back up included the following: by September 6, 13 offices were closed. Three days later, only two remained closed. By September 21 all ARS field sites and USDA Service Centers were reopened.

Frank Ramsey, OCIO's Alexandria, La.-based technical staffer for USDA's Service Centers in Louisiana, said that he worked with his state-level OCIO technical staffer counterparts—**Susan Dillard** in Auburn, Ala., and **Tom Powe** in Jackson, Miss.,—to coordinate technical issues with commercial telecommunication vendors to



APHIS's **Dwight LeBlanc** (center) steers his APHIS Wildlife Services airboat through the flooded streets of New Orleans, while Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries wildlife agent **George Robinson** serves as security support. They are on their way to pick up individuals being evacuated from a flooded hospital.—**PHOTO BY WALTER COTTON**

restore data and phone circuits. "USDA agency-level telecommunication Mission Area Control Officers have a strong relationship with commercial telecommunication vendors," Adler underscored. "And that contributed greatly to the effective response we received from vendors."

Larry Wade, the Forest Service's Eastern Zone telecommunications manager based in Atlanta, said that, included in the Katrina-caused damage were 37 USDA research sites and Forest Service sites in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama. "In order to re-establish basic private radio service," he explained, "our agency's telecommunication employees relied on partially damaged towers and ad-hoc equipment to erect makeshift antennas."

"Our Forest Service radio technicians experienced long driving times to arrive at the damaged sites, and had to face extensive tree damage and downed power lines both along the way and at their destination," he added.

"But they re-established radio communication at those particular USDA research facilities, plus at the national forests, in this three-state area."

Ronnie Davis is a soil conservation technician with the Natural Resources Conservation Service in Geneva, Ala. He's also in the National Guard. His unit was called up to assist with post-Katrina efforts in Ocean Springs, Miss.

But upon arrival, Davis found that the only maps available were tourist-type maps—roadmaps. According to **Julie Best**, the NRCS public affairs specialist in the agency's state office in Auburn, Ala., when Davis is wearing his NRCS hat he works with digital data to produce conservation plans for producers in Geneva County, Ala. "So," she noted, "he knew what digital data was available through NRCS, he was familiar with the equipment needed to produce the product, and he knew how valuable the maps would be to those in the relief effort."

Accordingly, Davis made arrangements to obtain a 'Digital Topographic Support System,' which is an NRCS system of digital files through which he could produce maps.

A phone call to his NRCS office in Geneva put things in motion. In turn, **Rick Zellmer**, NRCS's geographic information specialist at Auburn, contacted the agency's Cartography and Geospatial Center in Fort Worth, Texas—which put together the digital data needed for the entire southern portion of Mississippi. Best said that the data were burned to a CD and sent overnight to Davis.

"When we arrived in Mississippi," Davis recounted, "there were very little communications systems available, and the local police had one map mounted on a wall. So we set up our own equipment on the runway at the local airport and operated it off of our own generator. With this setup, we produced over 800 maps to support the operation in our sector."

"We didn't have Internet access on arrival," Davis continued. "So we had to hand-deliver the maps. But with these maps we could pinpoint local needs. And not only did we produce maps for our own National Guard unit, we produced maps for the local police and for state troopers coming in from other states, plus we produced large maps for use by FEMA for distribution points."

"The maps we produced helped provide a framework for relief efforts in the Ocean Springs area."

While some USDA employees were working to get USDA facilities functioning again, other USDA employees were working with evacuees, offering them USDA services in the aftermath of this natural disaster. As noted earlier, that's what we do, as part of our mission. Nonetheless, there were some particularly noteworthy, interesting, and at times poignant incidents, as part of those efforts, that employees wanted to share.

For instance, **Dwight LeBlanc**, APHIS's Wildlife Services State Director for Louisiana, based in Port Allen, was part of a team that included **Walter Cotton**, an APHIS wildlife biologist in Monroe, La., **Randy Choate**, an APHIS wildlife specialist in Abbeville, La., and **Tony Gruehl**, an APHIS wildlife specialist in LeCompte, La. "What we tried to do after Katrina," he explained, "was to see if we could use our three Wildlife Services flat-bottom boats and one airboat to assist in the rescue effort."

"As one of our activities, we arrived at a helicopter landing area—temporarily established on an interstate in New Orleans," he said. "We could help by unloading rescued victims from the landing choppers and then triaging them—separating the well from the sick and the sick from the really sick." He said, "We also passed on some safety advice to the landing pad coordinator: cut down some trees and knock down a highway overhead light in the helicopter landing zone."

"I guess the landing pad coordinator appreciated what we were doing in triage," LeBlanc said. "He started calling us the 'A-Team'."

Trini Mayo, an RD multi-family housing specialist based in Wenatchee, Wash., was in Republic, Wash., for a recent staff meeting. It



"In addition to FEMA housing and HUD housing, we at USDA also offer some housing options that might help you out," explains **Brian Lewis** (center), a Rural Development specialist with the RD local office in Alexandria, La. He and **Faye Hornsby** (right), a single-family housing technician with the RD state office in Alexandria, La., are helping hurricane evacuees to relocate into vacant RD housing units available around the country.—**PHOTO BY HOLLY MARTIEN**

was the same day that **Curtiss Jones**, formerly of New Orleans, arrived in Republic as a beneficiary of RD's placement efforts. "Republic was the last place I expected to find a Katrina evacuee," said Mayo, who then personally escorted Jones to the RD-funded housing complex which represented his new residence.

Jones' journey had taken him from the New Orleans Superdome to Austin, Texas and then to Republic. Mayo said that the RD office staff in Wenatchee took up a collection for Jones' family, presenting him with \$170 plus food, clothing, and kitchen items for his new apartment.

The USDA Food Safety Mobile is a 35-foot-long vehicle covered with colorful graphics and normally appears at fairs, senior centers, and grocery stores to teach about safe food handling.

But in the aftermath of Katrina it has been deployed to the Gulf Coast region to educate people about the unique food safety challenges they face, following that hurricane. **Robyn Sadagursky**, coordinator of the Food Safety Mobile program in the Food Safety and Inspection Service, said its current mission includes distributing public health and food safety information, cleaning agents, hand sanitizers, and refrigerator thermometers to the public—at no charge.

Tim Leonard, a retired FSIS employee, is the driver of the Food Safety Mobile. In the journal he has been keeping during the vehicle's trek across Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama, he recently wrote that "People really liked the refrigerator thermometers because they're worried that their refrigerators aren't working right, but have no way to know for sure."

Now, back to that USDA Hotline: Redington advised that, as of Oct. 12, all of USDA's missing employees, post-Katrina, have been accounted for and all survived. "Accordingly," he affirmed, "we have shifted our USDA Hotline into the USDA Watch Officers' desk, which is staffed 24/7, and our USDA employee volunteers have gone back to their normal duties." ■



"...so, next," explains **Monique Hatten** (left), the human resources liaison officer with FNS's Mid-Atlantic Region in Robbinsville, N.J., "you whip the eggs, peppers, and onions—and then, if you're really inspired like my two colleagues here, you break out into a boogie." Hatten was busy making low-cal breakfast burritos during a recent "Breakfast in the Office" activity to promote healthy eating. As part of the gig, many employees dressed in pajamas and slippers as they also downed low-cal fruit muffins and nutrition shakes. Movin' to the Breakfast Beat are FNS program specialist **Mark Durma** (center) and FNS program analyst **Jeanne Hutchins**. Note **Krystyna Frolich's** story on page 4.—**PHOTO BY TIM WALSH**

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HELP US FIND
Tawana Nicole Stocker

Missing: **1-3-2005** From: **Plymouth, MN**
 D.O.B. **2-24-1991** Sex: **Female**
 Hair: **Black** Eyes: **Brown**
 Height: **5 ft. 0 in.** Weight: **100 lbs.**

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National Disability Employment Awareness Month
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- **October to December**
Combined Federal Campaign
 USDA headquarters and field offices
 (202) 690-3081 or 1-800-877-8339 (TDD)
- **Month of November**
American Indian/Alaskan Native Heritage Month
 USDA headquarters and field offices
 (202) 720-7314 or (202) 720-6382 (TDD)