

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

March 3, 2009

**TO:** All USDA Employees

**FROM:** Thomas J. Vilsack   
Secretary

**SUBJECT:** Ethical Conduct

Maintaining high ethical standards is essential to gaining the public's trust. Everyone who enters into public service for the United States has a duty to the American public to maintain the highest standards of integrity. The faith and confidence of the American public in the integrity of its Government rest not only on what we do, but also on how we do it.

I have every reason to believe that the vast majority of employees at the Department of Agriculture work diligently to meet both the letter and the spirit of the ethics laws and regulations. Your sense of integrity and commitment to ethical standards are something in which the American public can take pride. In this, we must not only follow our personal standards of integrity but also adhere to specific time-tested ethics laws, regulations, and principles that govern our participation in official matters where those matters intersect with our personal interests. Honorable intentions and personal ethos do not excuse conduct that causes the public to doubt the integrity and fairness of our programs and services.

Accordingly, all employees of the Department of Agriculture need to be thoroughly familiar with and faithfully observe all applicable ethics laws and regulations, including the Federal conflict of interest statutes and applicable regulations, namely the *Standards of Ethical Conduct for Employees of the Executive Branch* and the *Supplemental Standards of Ethical Conduct for Employees of the Department of Agriculture*. These can be accessed under "Rules of the Road" at the USDA Office of Ethics website: [www.usda.gov/ethics](http://www.usda.gov/ethics).

While these laws and regulations are detailed and fairly technical, employees can always focus on the 14 core principles set forth at the end of this memorandum. Moreover, all incoming non-career employees at USDA shall become familiar and comply fully with the requirements set forth in President Obama's Executive Order concerning Ethics Commitments by Executive Branch Personnel, issued on January 21, 2009. Finally, I expect all USDA employees to meet all ethics training and financial disclosure requirements in a timely manner.

Maintaining high ethical standards of conduct is not just a worthy goal; it is vital to our being able to accomplish our mission. We are faced with meeting some of the most challenging issues of our time, and we cannot afford to be sidetracked—even for a moment—by allegations of unethical conduct, whether based in fact or on appearance. We can only increase the public's confidence in the integrity and effectiveness of our programs by ensuring that we know the rules and abide by both the letter and the spirit of those rules.

## **14 CORE PRINCIPLES OF GOVERNMENT ETHICS**

1. Public service is a public trust, requiring employees to place loyalty to the Constitution, the laws, and ethical principles above private gain.
2. Employees shall not hold financial interests that conflict with the conscientious performance of duty.
3. Employees shall not engage in financial transactions using non-public Government information or allow the improper use of such information to further any private interest.
4. An employee shall not, except pursuant to such reasonable exceptions as are provided by regulation, solicit or accept any gift or other item of monetary value from any person or entity seeking official action from, doing business with, or conducting activities regulated by the employee's agency, or whose interests may be substantially affected by the performance or non-performance of the employee's duties.
5. Employees shall put forth honest effort in the performance of their duties.
6. Employees shall make no unauthorized commitments or promises of any kind purporting to bind the Government.
7. Employees shall not use public office for private gain.
8. Employees shall act impartially and not give preferential treatment to any private organization or individual.
9. Employees shall protect and conserve Federal property and shall not use it for other than authorized activities.
10. Employees shall not engage in outside employment or activities, including seeking or negotiating for employment, that conflict with official Government duties and responsibilities.
11. Employees shall disclose waste, fraud, abuse, and corruption to appropriate authorities.
12. Employees shall satisfy in good faith their obligations as citizens including all just financial obligations and especially those—such as Federal, State, or local taxes—that are imposed by law.
13. Employees shall adhere to all laws and regulations that provide equal opportunity for all Americans regardless of race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age, or handicap.
14. Employees shall endeavor to avoid any actions creating the appearance that they are violating the law or the ethical standards promulgated pursuant to this order.