Seeds of success

How the USDA's online portal equips farmers to grow their businesses

Case study

Challenge

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) serves more than 2 million ranchers, farmers and producers across the country.

The vital programs that it offers, including crop insurance services, conservation programs, technical assistance, and commodity, lending and disaster relief programs, help make farming sustainable by mitigating many risks. Supporting this community are roughly 100,000 employees spanning more than 4,500 locations.

> While these services were incredibly important to farmers and other producers, program information was often hard to access, spread over multiple websites or not even accessible online.

This often required farmers to either fax written forms or travel significant distances to USDA field offices to manage their farms and ranches. The Farm Production and Conservation (FPAC) mission area, USDA's focal point for agricultural producers, was established to provide an integrated, comprehensive and modern approach to serving this community. It recognized the need to improve the process and the customer experience—from reducing duplication to increasing consistency. FPAC sought to unify processes for application submissions and provide streamlined program support and customer management.

> "Farmers.gov is built around the needs of customers, with farmer-focused content, interactive tools, and a business data dashboard that allows producers more time to focus on their farm and less time filling out antiquated and time intensive paper forms."

- USDA Annual Report.[1]

As such, the secretary sought a one-stop shop where farmers, ranchers and producers could fill out forms, check loan balance and status, apply for disaster assistance and find the most convenient USDA office locations. USDA said it was seeking a solution "built around the needs of customers, with farmer-focused content, interactive tools, and a business data dashboard that allows producers more time to focus on their farm and less time filling out antiquated and time-intensive paper forms."

[1] FY 2019 Annual Performance Report/ FY 2021 Annual Performance Plan; https://www.usda.gov/sites/default/files/documents/fy19-appr-final-3-26-2020.pdf

How Accenture Helped

Working closely with USDA's team, we set out to make producers' experiences more integrated and human-focused.

We travelled to USDA field offices and farms across the country to analyze the customer experience from every angle.

The team then applied its insights to help consolidate seven existing digital platforms and 150 federal Web resources into farmers.gov, an integrated, mobile-friendly, interactive portal.

Among its many goals, the farmers.gov program was designed for speed, agility and responsiveness. We set out to design a dynamic transactional portal with core capabilities—targeted, timely, meaningful and inclusive with immediate value to customers and employees.
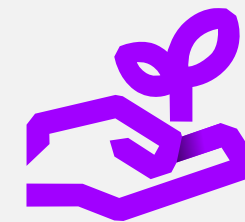
This included a series of digital features that have provided great value for producers and employees alike, including:

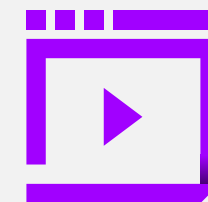Accessing and viewing loan status and history, anywhere, anytime
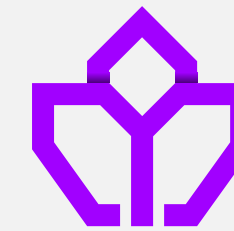
Applying for disaster recovery programs

Receiving economic relief

Having 24/7 access to conservation information and services

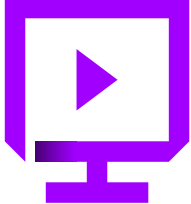Piloting employee-proctored digital geospatial acreage reporting

Accessing electronic signature capabilities from home

Our team used a number of human-centered design (HCD) and service design practices, many adapted for government within the Accenture Federal Digital Studio, to create these services. We conducted workshops with employees and end-users, enabling the team to develop user experiences and service blueprints with a more instinctive and cohesive flow. The team ultimately created two primary customer journeys with more than 20 user flows and 65 application screens to guide users intuitively through a number of diverse tasks.

Farmers.gov was developed on the Salesforce cloud-based platform. This allowed the team to leverage a number of integrated customer engagement and user authentication tools to meet the unique needs of every farmer.

As an early example, before the launch of farmers.gov, the USDA's loan process was time-consuming and cumbersome. Previously, when farmers or ranchers received federal loans from USDA, they were unable to view their loan balances or payment histories online. This meant customers had to go through a largely manual update process by phone, mail and email, causing information delays and straining the bandwidth of field office employees.

It also facilitated an agile, iterative development process where new features and capabilities could be delivered as they were developed to maximize value.

20
USERFLOWS

65
APPLICATION SCREENS
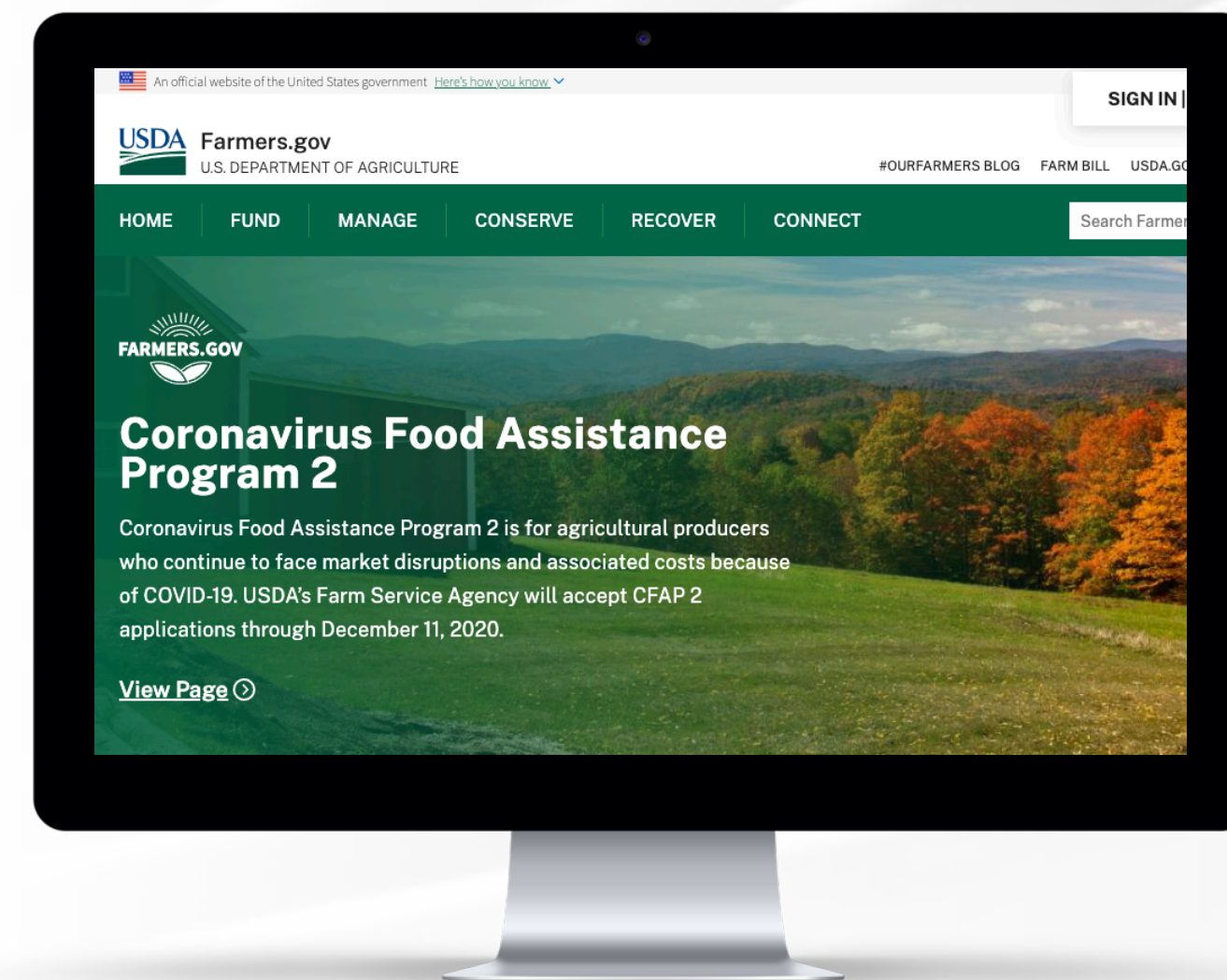
Working with GSA's Customer Experience Center of Excellence, we identified the features and capabilities most important to farmers and loan officers alike.

We then developed a series of concepts, wireframes and prototypes that we iteratively refined with FPAC executives to best meet these needs. The initial applications were then implemented within a matter of weeks for customers to view their loan data. It provided quick, easy and real-time access to loan payment history and balance information and tax documentation, significantly improving the FPAC customer and employee experience.

To further accelerate development of farmers.gov while maintaining consistent quality, Accenture also helped USDA stand up the Scaled Agile Framework (SAFe) to manage a continuous backlog of features and implemented a DevSecOps pipeline to quickly prototype and test new features.

People and Culture

The development of farmers.gov has been a journey and a deep learning experience—for designers, developers, employees and users.

The use of HCD design in particular was critical to explore, imagine, design, develop and promote compelling digital experiences. Accenture worked closely with USDA to design services, systems and experiences around the needs, challenges and business objectives of customers, including employees, producers and stakeholders.

> This human-centered approach accelerated and broadens adoption of the new processes and user interface, speeds time to value, and has led to sustainable, customer-centered transformation.

To better serve America's farmers, ranchers, and foresters, FPAC is building a dynamic, online customer-driven website—farmers.gov—that delivers the information, tools, and first-hand advice built around the needs of the people who grow our food, fiber, flora, and fuel.

This human-centered focus combined with SAFe, has helped enable a more responsive, agile approach. As a result, FPAC has been able to respond quickly to a series of potential disasters facing the agricultural sector. For example, the Market Facilitation Program and Wildfire and Hurricane Indemnity Program Plus provide billions in economic relief. While they had complex eligibility requirements, the team was able to quickly develop and deploy new applications that seamlessly enrolled eligible farmers into the programs, enabling automated payments and ensuring the success of each program.

In addition, these applications add value to the employees by allowing them to operate without paper folders, working more efficiently with adequate connection speeds, finding the information they need quickly, spending less time on data entry, eliminating the swivel chair between disparate systems, and completing applications on behalf of producers more efficiently.

USDA continues to enhance farmers.gov with new features, such as adding new programs focused on seafood producers.

"Farmers.gov delivers farmer-focused features through an agile, iterative process to deliver the greatest immediate value to America's agricultural producers – helping farmers and ranchers do right, and feed everyone."

- **USDA Press Release**[2]

[2] "USDA Launches New Farmers.gov Features to Help Farmers Hire Workers." USDA Press Release (July 27, 2020)

Value Delivered

Farmers.gov has successfully brought widespread value to USDA business functions and customers.

Designed for farmer needs first, the site has had more than 6.5 million customer page views. Additionally, as of Q4 GFY20, farmers.gov has been responsible for:
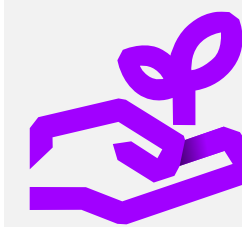
$15bn
More than $15.5 billion in distributed funding

4.6m
More than 4.6 million customer interactions

Farmers.gov continues to grow and evolve as well. Over a three-year period, the team successfully delivered more than 200 new features within 14 major releases and seven digital products.

Farmers.gov and the team that supports it have been recognized by USDA leadership and external organizations for its cross-cutting tools and delivery methods such as human-centered design, which have completely shifted the customer experience and set a new standard for federal websites. In 2019, the website's View Loans feature received the FSA Administrator's Award for Service to Agriculture. Additionally, farmers.gov leadership was recognized in 2020 with a Service to the Citizen award.

Farmers.gov is expected to dramatically reduce the time spent on low-value processes and save hundreds of thousands of hours in producer travel to local USDA offices, millions of hours of employee work time, and millions of dollars in paper storage. This shifts employee and customer conversations entirely to high-value topics like program enrollment options, answering complex questions and creating plans that best support the producer.

> **In 2019, the website's View Loans feature received the FSA Administrator's Award for Service to Agriculture**

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