



The Technology Modernization Fund

A new funding model for Federal technology modernization projects

USDA Specialty Crops Inspection:

Efficiently inspecting produce to safeguard the food supply and boost farm revenues

A TMF investment of \$8M improved operational efficiency at the USDA by eliminating manual, paper-based processes that required duplicative data entry.

Background

The USDA Agricultural Marketing Service's (AMS) Specialty Crops Inspection Division (SCID) inspects fruits, vegetables, and other crops and products for compliance with safety and quality standards. To provide a sense of scale, the SCID inspected 60 billion pounds of fruit, both fresh and processed, in FY 2018.

The SCID also issues the official USDA grade shields, seals and labels that symbolize the quality and integrity of American agricultural products. The quality grades provide a common "language" for large-volume buyers such as grocery stores, military institutions, restaurants, and even foreign governments, making business transactions easier. In addition, the quality certifications allow producers' goods to be used in specialized domestic feeding programs such as the Free and Reduced lunch program and military MRE (Meals Ready-to-Eat).

Challenge

SCID sends inspectors to farms and factories to assess facilities and inspect fresh and processed crops.

Documentation of this process was previously paper-based—inspectors would tour sites with long checklists of factors on clipboards and return to the office at the end of the day with a stack of papers for manual entry into outdated computer systems. The process was slow and costly, resulting in numerous inefficiencies.

Certifications also had to be physically mailed to farmers and small business owners, who then had to physically mail the certification to processing agencies like the Department of Homeland Security – which was slow and took farmers and small business owners away from their daily work – leading to an overall poor user experience.

Since the new inspection system:

- 49.9 billion pounds of perishable fruits and vegetables inspected
- 10.7 billion pounds of processed fruit and vegetable products inspected
- Eliminated duplicative processes and created cost savings
- Improved reporting capabilities to enhance transparency
- 410 million servings of combat rations and \$713 million worth of school lunches inspected

Solution

In 2019, the TMF invested \$8 million to modernize USDA's Specialty Crops Inspection Operating Network (SCION) system, improve the speed and safety of the inspection process, and deliver better value to farmers and

consumers. The TMF funding was critical in modernizing the legacy systems in an expeditious manner within a short duration in time.

The new system improved operational efficiency while leveraging commercially available offerings to securely manage billing, inspection, and certification processes. Manual, paper-based processes that required duplicative data entry were eliminated. The new system enables customers to submit online service requests and staff to respond more quickly and efficiently to those requests. Additionally, electronic certificates can now be issued rather than relying on postal mail to provide paper certificates to customers.

Impact

The upgraded SCION platform now allows inspectors to tour facilities with tablets and securely input data directly into USDA systems, eliminating the need to collect data on paper and then travel back to a USDA office for manual input and recording. Farmers and consumers, as well as those involved in the marketing of agricultural products, benefit from the greater efficiency of the new system.

The legacy system is estimated to cost about \$2.5 million to maintain and update annually. Once the system is retired, the agency projects an annual savings of \$1.72 million in operations and maintenance costs. However, equally important to the cost savings are efficiencies saved and the increase in services provided to the industry.

USDA faced challenges in providing a good customer experience using legacy processes and systems. Due to the work of this project, USDA was able to securely provide faster, more accurate service while providing customers with analytics and other data that were previously unavailable.

This project has also transformed operations and improved the timeliness of inspections through a modernized dispatching process—resulting in reduced food waste and spoilage. By providing more data and analytics, AMS's customers may be able to identify ways to improve the efficiency of their own operations while meeting the certification standards. These benefits accrue to the end consumer of the specialty crops products, including children participating in the school lunch programs and members of the military who consume Meals-Ready-to-Eat.

Role of the TMF

With funding and support from the TMF, USDA's digitization effort was completed in 2022 – in just three years with an \$8 million investment. Without this funding, execution of this project would have occurred in a piecemeal fashion through 2025 rather than as a single effort that provides a modern, holistic system for SCID's billing, inspection, and certificate processes.

TMF provides resources and shared services to help the Administration, Congress, and its partner agencies rapidly deploy and make a difference in the lives of the public.

The USDA Specialty Crops Inspection example shows how TMF uses both funding and technical expertise to help the government improve processes, reduce errors and delays, and build on existing knowledge and resources. TMF investments and program support can help agencies modernize to meet demand surges.

As part of the TMF process, USDA will detail lessons-learned and best practices in a playbook that will serve as a guide for other agencies modernizing their systems, particularly those that need to eliminate paper-based processes.