

Defra and IBM – taking the paperwork out of farming

Overview

Business challenge

To improve service quality while reducing costs, Defra needed to transform the way it works with farmers. Increased collaboration, knowledge provision and information-sharing would improve regulatory compliance and reduce the administrative burden on farmers.

IBM solution

IBM helped create a strategic plan and technical solution to translate Defra's vision of enhanced information-sharing, customer service and regulatory compliance into reality.

Customer benefits

- Reduced costs – industry savings of up to £16.5 million per year by 2008 and a forecast net present value of £93 million over ten years
- Increased efficiency – farmers are expected to spend around 15% less time form filling
- Increased regulatory compliance for better public protection
- Better use of scarce resources – Defra will be able to target inspection and enforcement resources more accurately.

Established in 2001, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) assumed the role of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, along with responsibilities for environmental protection, wildlife, conservation and animal welfare.

Under constant pressure to improve service quality and cut costs by increasing its efficiency, Defra selected IBM to help develop and implement a seven-year IT renewal and transformation programme and deliver a number of major programme initiatives.

One of the first initiatives was to create an online service for farmers and growers, with the aim of taking the paperwork out of farming.

This service, known as The Whole Farm Approach (WFA), epitomises the three core tenets of transformational government: citizen focused, e-enabled and joined up government. WFA is a major element of Defra's Five Year Strategy, and has been identified as one of the key delivery channels contributing towards reducing the administrative burden from regulation by at least 25% over the next five years.

A two-way street

Working in partnership with core Defra, Defra agencies and public bodies, IBM developed the strategic vision for the WFA. Innovative techniques generated and assessed future options, focusing on areas that would deliver maximum benefit to farmers.

The Whole Farm Approach could provide industry savings of up to £16.5 million per year by 2008 thanks to reduced administration and operational efficiencies.

The WFA offers England's 130,000 farms a new web-based service that provides a single gateway, or portal, to a range of services, including regulatory self-assessment. Farmers can register and gain access not

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only to relevant web sites, but also to a series of tools, including business benchmarking, agricultural surveys, waste exemption applications, and online tracking of cattle movements.

“From the outset, WFA was developed around the concept of gathering information for our own use, but also providing information back to farmers – a two-way street if you like,” says Charles McCall, Programme Manager within the Innovation and Better Regulation for Farmers Division at Defra. “By providing farmers with clearer information, understanding and guidance, we believe we have a much better chance of influencing their behaviour and achieving the outcome we want in both environmental and regulatory areas.”

Continual user feedback

During its development, IBM and Defra took great care to ensure that the WFA reflected farmers’ interests. McCall says: “The IBM team organised a range of events and forum activities for farmers, resulting in a robust base of evidence to help us decide how the portal should develop.”

IBM also developed tools to help Defra continue to monitor the WFA as it develops. A balanced scorecard measures key indicators of success and tracks the delivery of business case benefits. By continually listening to farmers’ needs, the WFA team can assess requirements and plan enhancements.

Increasing benefit

There are many immediate benefits to farmers who use the WFA and more will accrue as it develops. Farmers can already apply for waste exemption licences and complete their June annual Agricultural Survey online. Farmers are guided through the process and the questions are tailored to their individual responses.

Over ten years, the WFA is forecast to deliver a net present value of £93 million. Industry savings could be as much as £16.5 million per year by 2008 thanks to reduced administration and operational efficiencies. On average, farmers are expected to spend around 15 per cent less time form filling.

Farmers at its heart

By giving rapid access to a wealth of up-to-date farming information, advice and best practice guidance, the WFA keeps farmers better informed about how to comply with legislation. It helps them evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of their businesses more easily.

Farmers and growers have the opportunity to save time, stay informed, demonstrate good practice and reduce the necessity for inspection, while Defra will have access to new and accurate data that can be used to make better-informed policy decisions.

Ultimately, the WFA will improve regulatory compliance, providing better public and environmental protection. Through better information sharing and an integrated, joined up approach, Defra and its partners will be able to target inspection and enforcement resources more effectively – based on an assessment of risk – assisting those farms in most need of support.

“The Whole Farm Approach represents a realisation of the benefits that can be achieved by all when we place citizens, in this case farmers, at the heart of our delivery focus,” concludes Chris Chant, Chief Information Officer at Defra.



IBM United Kingdom Limited

PO Box 41
North Harbour
Portsmouth
Hampshire
PO6 3AU

Tel: 0870 010 2503
ibm.com/services/uk

IBM Ireland Limited

Oldbrook House
24-32 Pembroke Road
Dublin 4

Tel: 1890 200 392
ibm.com/services/ie

IBM South Africa Limited

Private Bag X9907
Sandhurst
2146
South Africa

Tel: 0860 700 777
ibm.com/servicessolutions/za

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