

# Building Confidence in the S&T Ranking Process at USDA APHIS



## Safeguarding our Agricultural Systems

USDA Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service's (APHIS) Plant Protection and Quarantine (PPQ) program safeguards U.S. agriculture and natural resources against the entry, establishment, and spread of economically and environmentally significant pests, and facilitates the safe trade of agricultural products.

Over the last 12 years the program has grown from managing \$10 million dollars a year to managing \$75 million per year due to an increasing number of people in Congress and petitioners interested protecting our agricultural systems.



## Challenges of a Quickly Growing Program

With close to 900 projects submitted for funding and review, it can be difficult to ensure that all stakeholders are heard; a vital part of any S&T policy and planning process. Leadership, scientists, and managers who oversee the research all have an important voice and role in deciding what to fund, how to fund it, what's a priority, and how to establish requirements.

In the beginning, when they had 10-15 projects to prioritize it was manageable to use two to three days to sort and rank projects manually. Now that the applications for funding have grown exponentially, the number of stakeholders has also grown. It is no longer feasible to score and rank priorities manually.

Sharla Jennings, National Policy Manager, Plant Protection Act Section 7721, USDA-APHIS-Plant Protection and Quarantine said the organization knows the importance of gaining buy-in across the board to ensure everyone feels like they are part of the decisions made. Feedback from stakeholders is vital to the process. However, ensuring everyone weighs in would be overwhelming without a system in place to manage the scoring and ranking process.



## Ensuring Efficiency and that Every Voice is Heard

USDA APHIS partners with Decision Lens to enhance collaboration in their decision-making process.

“We know when we used Decision Lens the decisions aren’t based on just one person,” Jennings said. “The scoring is weighted and it helps us in terms of making sure the process is transparent and not just based on personal opinions.”

Jennings also said that the Decision Lens framework helps build confidence in the process. USDA APHIS has seven goal areas. Within each goal there is a set of reviewers, resulting in over 100 users weighing in on decisions. Their main criteria was agreed upon by all stakeholders and stays constant from year to year. They can also collaboratively establish subcriteria or “children” that can be adjusted each year depending on needs.

Jennings said that her team enjoys using Decision Lens because it is user friendly. This past year 15-20% of the staff was newly onboarded and needed to be trained on the software.

“We have so many systems that we already use. When we tell them we are adding another one at first you get the eye roll, but then when they get in there and they see how easy it is to use, I get positive feedback.” Sharla said.



## Supporting Continued Growth through Scalability

Having Decision Lens in place makes it easier and faster for USDA APHIS staff to prioritize projects, freeing up time for those in the organization to focus on implementing their mission. Though it can be difficult to collaborate and ensure every voice is heard across a large swath of people, with the support of Decision Lens’ easy to use software, USDA APHIS has been able to continue to expedite its scoring and ranking process, while ensuring that all feedback is captured.

Decision Lens’ scalability has supported the organization as it has grown over the last 12 years so that they can confidently run their expanding program’s ranking and prioritization process with the same efficiency as when the partnership first began.