



United States Department of Agriculture

# U.S. Department of Agriculture's 2020 Compliance with the Geospatial Data Act



Audit Report 50501-0023-12

September 2020

OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL

# USDA's 2020 Compliance with the Geospatial Data Act

## Audit Report 50501-0023-12

OIG reviewed USDA's compliance with the covered agency responsibilities outlined in the Geospatial Data Act.

### OBJECTIVE

OIG's initial objectives were to assess: (1) USDA's compliance with the standards for geospatial data, including metadata for geospatial data established under section 757; (2) USDA's compliance with the requirements under subsection 759(a); and (3) USDA's compliance with the limitation on the use of Federal funds under section 759A. However, we ultimately limited the audit to an assessment of USDA's compliance with the covered agency responsibilities specific to Objective 2 in accordance with the recommended audit approach issued by the Council of the Inspectors General on Integrity and Efficiency.

### REVIEWED

We reviewed pertinent geospatial datasets and USDA guidance, and interviewed applicable personnel to determine compliance with the requirements outlined in the Geospatial Data Act.

### RECOMMENDS

We recommend that USDA develop and implement policies and procedures to govern the oversight of USDA's Geospatial Data Act compliance. Additionally, USDA needs to publish and implement a strategic plan in accordance with the Act.

### WHAT OIG FOUND

The Office of Inspector General (OIG) found that the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) was not compliant with all the covered agency responsibilities outlined in the Geospatial Data Act. Specifically, USDA did not comply with 3 of the 13 responsibilities, which include the development of a geospatial strategy; using geospatial standards, including metadata standards; and having approved National Archives and Records Administration records schedules for geospatial datasets. Overall, this occurred due to the lack of USDA-specific Geospatial Data Act guidance. As a result, USDA is not completely fulfilling its role of improving Federal management, coordination, and utilization of geospatial data, which can negatively impact infrastructure and emergency response capabilities nationwide.

USDA generally concurred with our two recommendations. However, further action from OCIO is needed before management decision can be reached for each recommendation.





United States Department of Agriculture  
Office of Inspector General  
Washington, D.C. 20250



DATE: September 29, 2020

AUDIT  
NUMBER: 50501-0023-12

TO: Gary Washington  
Chief Information Officer  
Office of the Chief Information Officer

ATTN: Megen Davis  
Director  
Strategic Planning, Policy, E-Government and Audit

FROM: Gil Harden  
Assistant Inspector General for Audit  
Office of Inspector General

SUBJECT: USDA's 2020 Compliance with the Geospatial Data Act

This report presents the results of the subject review. Your written response to the official draft is included in its entirety at the end of the report. We have incorporated excerpts from your response and the Office of Inspector General's (OIG) position into the relevant sections of the report. We are unable to accept management decisions on Recommendations 1 and 2. Please refer to the OIG position section for additional information on how to reach management decision for the corresponding recommendations.

In accordance with Departmental Regulation 1720-1, final action needs to be taken within 1 year of each management decision to prevent being listed in the Department's annual Agency Financial Report.

We appreciate the courtesies and cooperation extended to us by members of your staff during our audit fieldwork and subsequent discussions. This report contains publicly available information and will be posted in its entirety to our website (<http://www.usda.gov/oig>) in the near future.



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# Background and Objectives

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## Background

The Federal Government recognized the need to organize and coordinate the collection and management of geospatial data since 1990. In that year, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) revised Circular A-16.<sup>1</sup> In the past, Congress recognized the challenge of coordinating and sharing geospatial data<sup>2</sup> from the local, county, and State level to the National level. Until enactment of the Geospatial Data Act (GDA), the executive branch had led nearly all efforts to better coordinate and share geospatial data within the Federal Government.<sup>3</sup> The GDA was signed into law on October 5, 2018. The purpose of the Act is to minimize duplication of geospatial activities across agencies and improve collaboration, reduce waste, codify previous executive actions, and give Congress an oversight role for the Federal Government’s multibillion dollar investments in geospatial data.<sup>4</sup>

The GDA applies to agencies defined in the Act, referred to as “covered agencies,” that collect, produce, acquire, maintain, distribute, use, or preserve geospatial data on paper or in electronic form to fulfill the mission of the Executive department, either directly or through a relationship with another organization.<sup>5</sup> USDA is 1 of 15 covered executive Departments. Currently, four USDA agencies participate in the management of National Geospatial Data Assets (NGDA) datasets: the Farm Service Agency, Forest Service, National Agricultural Statistics Service, and Natural Resources Conservation Service.

Additionally, the Office of the Chief Information Officer (OCIO) is responsible for providing executive leadership, oversight, and accountability for geospatial data and capital assets. To fulfill this responsibility, USDA appointed a geospatial information officer within the OCIO Enterprise Geospatial Management Office to oversee, coordinate, and facilitate USDA internal and external coordination and implementation of geospatial policies, directives, requirements, and data management.<sup>6</sup> USDA’s Enterprise Geospatial Management Office provides enterprise-level leadership to align geospatial strategic planning, policy, tactical implementation, and

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<sup>1</sup> Circular A-16 provides for improvements in the coordination and use of spatial data, and describes the effective and economic use and management of spatial data assets in the digital environment for the benefit of the Government and the Nation.

<sup>2</sup> Geospatial data sets are distinct pieces of digital information that have been formatted in a specific way.

<sup>3</sup> FAA Reauthorization Act of 2018, Pub. L. No. 115-254, Subtitle F, §§ 751–759 (Geospatial Data Act of 2018).

<sup>4</sup> The GDA defines geospatial data as “information that is tied to a location on the Earth, including by identifying the geographic location and characteristics of natural or constructed features and boundaries on the Earth, and that is generally represented in vector datasets by points, lines, polygons, or other complex geographic features or phenomena.” The geospatial data may be derived from various technologies, which include images, aerial photographs, and other forms of data or datasets in digitized or non-digitized form, with some exclusions.

<sup>5</sup> The Executive departments identified in § 101 of tit. 5, United States Code and defined as covered agencies by the GDA are the Departments of: State, Treasury, Defense, Justice, Interior, Agriculture, Commerce, Labor, Health and Human Services, Housing and Urban Development, Transportation, Energy, Education, Veterans Affairs, and Homeland Security. The National Aeronautics and Space Administration and the General Services Administration are also defined as covered agencies by the GDA.

<sup>6</sup> OMB M-06-07, *Designation of a Senior Agency Official for Geospatial Information* (Mar. 3, 2006), required USDA, amongst others, to designate a Senior Agency Official for Geospatial Information.

operational capability with USDA’s mission requirements and performance goals. Its key focus areas are ensuring agency geospatial products and services are represented and managed as enterprise assets, enabling equal access to shared services, and conducting public service innovation prototypes.

USDA appointed the geospatial information officer to serve as a member of the Federal Geographic Data Committee (FGDC) steering committee.<sup>7</sup> The FGDC acts as the lead entity in the executive branch for the development, implementation, and review of policies, practices, and standards relating to geospatial data. In addition, OMB has a role in geospatial guidance. OMB and FGDC lead the development and management of operational decision-making for the National Spatial Data Infrastructure strategic plan and geospatial data policy, designate NGDA data themes,<sup>8</sup> establish and maintain geospatial data standards, conduct reviews of covered agencies’ compliance with geospatial data standards, and ensure GeoPlatform operations are in accordance with the Act.<sup>9</sup> The GDA requires OMB and FGDC to establish standards for NGDAs and develop additional standards as needed, only establishing new standards if existing standards are not sufficient.<sup>10</sup> However, the GDA does not explicitly explain whether the existing body of Geospatial standards endorsed and issued by FGDC prior to the Act continue to be in effect under the Act. As of August 2020, the FGDC and OMB have not provided clarification to covered agencies on the implementation of the Act explaining which, if any, standards to follow according to the Act. Furthermore, the FGDC has expressed the need for clarification on whether the GDA applies to both NGDAs as well as geospatial systems not classified as NGDAs. In addition to the geospatial standard requirements outlined within the Act, the GDA also establishes covered agency responsibilities.<sup>11</sup> These responsibilities are to be fulfilled by the covered agency and are not predicated on needing additional guidance from bodies outside of the agency’s control.

As a requirement of the GDA, the FGDC is responsible for developing the GeoPlatform to provide access to geospatial data and metadata to the general public.<sup>12</sup> The GeoPlatform is also designed to promote data sharing and collaboration. As of July 2020, the FGDC reported 178 NGDAs across 11 Federal departments and agencies (including USDA) through the GeoPlatform. A geospatial dataset can be designated as an NGDA if it meets one of the following elements:

- used by multiple agencies or with agency partners such as State, Tribal, and local governments;
- applied to achieve Presidential priorities as expressed by OMB;

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<sup>7</sup> The FGDC Steering Committee is the policy-level interagency group responsible for providing leadership and direction in support of the OMB Circular A-16 related activities and the development of the National Spatial Data Infrastructure.

<sup>8</sup> An NGDA data theme refers to the NGDA core geospatial datasets (including electronic records and coordinates) relating to a topic or subject designated under section 756 of the GDA. Examples of themes include imagery, land use-land cover, and soils.

<sup>9</sup> The FGDC operates an electronic service that provides access to geospatial data and metadata for geospatial data to the general public known as the GeoPlatform.

<sup>10</sup> FAA Reauthorization Act of 2018, Pub. L. No. 115-254, Subtitle F, §§ 757 (Geospatial Data Act of 2018).

<sup>11</sup> FAA Reauthorization Act of 2018, Pub. L. No. 115-254, Subtitle F, §§ 759(a) (Geospatial Data Act of 2018).

<sup>12</sup> Metadata consists of preserved contextual information describing the history, tracking, and/or management of an electronic document.

- required to meet shared mission goals of multiple Federal agencies; or
- expressly required by statutory mandate.

Not all Federal geospatial datasets are NGDAs; as such, the FGDC has expressed the need for clarification on whether the GDA applies to both NGDAs and geospatial datasets not classified as NGDAs. Due to the uncertainty of the applicability of the law, our review focused on the 16 USDA approved NGDA datasets.

## **Objective**

Our objective was to assess USDA's compliance with the requirements outlined by the GDA. Specifically, it was to: (1) assess USDA's compliance with the standards for geospatial data, including metadata for geospatial data established under section 757; (2) USDA's compliance with the requirements under subsection 759(a); and (3) USDA's compliance with the limitation on the use of Federal funds under section 759A.

After we commenced our audit, the Council of the Inspectors General on Integrity and Efficiency (CIGIE) convened a GDA Working Group, which evaluated the mandatory audit objectives and recommended that Inspectors General of the Covered Agencies focus on Objective 2. As part of this recommended approach, we assessed USDA's compliance with the 13 covered agency responsibilities as detailed under subsection 759(a) of the Act. We did not perform any audit procedures related to Objectives 1 and 3, and therefore do not provide any results on those objectives in accordance with the recommended CIGIE approach.

## **Finding 1: USDA’s Compliance with the Geospatial Data Act Covered Agency Responsibilities**

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We found that USDA was not compliant with all the covered agency responsibilities outlined in the GDA. This occurred due to the lack of USDA-specific GDA guidance pertaining to the implementation of USDA’s covered agency responsibilities. As a result, USDA is not completely fulfilling its role of improving Federal management, coordination, and utilization of geospatial data, which can negatively impact Department infrastructure and emergency response capabilities nationwide.

The 13 covered agency responsibilities, per the GDA, are listed in the table below:

<b>Number</b>	<b>Responsibility</b>
1	Prepare and implement a strategy for advancing geospatial data activities appropriate to the agency’s mission.
2	Collect maintain, disseminate, and preserve geospatial data such that resulting data, information, or products can be shared.
3	Promote the integration of geospatial data from all sources.
4	Ensure that geospatial data and activities are included on agency record schedules that have been approved by the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA).
5	Allocate resources to fulfill the responsibilities of effective geospatial data collection, production, and stewardship with regard to related activities of the covered agency, and as necessary to support the activities of the Committee.
6	Use the geospatial data standards, including the standards for metadata for geospatial data, and other appropriate standards, including documenting geospatial data with the relevant metadata and making metadata available through the GeoPlatform.
7	Coordinate with other Federal agencies, State, local, and Tribal governments, institutions of higher education, and the private sector to efficiently and cost effectively collect, integrate, maintain, disseminate, and preserve geospatial data.
8	Use geospatial information to make Federal geospatial information and services more useful to the public, enhance operations, support decision making, and enhance reporting to the public and to Congress.
9	Protect personal privacy and maintain confidentiality in accordance with Federal policy and law.
10	Participate in determining whether declassified data can become part of the National Spatial Data Infrastructure.
11	Search all sources, including the GeoPlatform, to determine if existing geospatial data meets the needs of the covered agency before expending funds to acquire geospatial data.
12	To the maximum extent practicable, ensure that those receiving Federal funds for geospatial data collection provide high-quality data.

**13** Appoint a contact to coordinate with other lead covered agencies of the NGDA data themes used by the covered agency.

Additionally, according to the Government Accountability Office's *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, documentation is required for the effective design, implementation, and operating effectiveness of an entity's internal control system.<sup>13</sup> As a mechanism for an effective internal control system, management should implement control activities through the issuance of policies. Further, a USDA Departmental Regulation states that USDA agencies and staff offices will establish, maintain, evaluate, improve, and report on systems of controls.<sup>14</sup> These systems should constitute the full range of controls necessary to assist managers in attaining program objectives and protecting and using Government resources efficiently and effectively.

Although USDA has made progress in complying with certain aspects of the GDA, such as promoting the integration of geospatial data from all sources, allocating resources to support the activities of the FGDC, and using geospatial information to make information more useful to the public, we found that USDA did not comply with all the covered agency responsibilities outlined in the GDA. Specifically, we found that 3 of the 13 responsibilities were not met.

According to the GDA, one of USDA's responsibilities is to implement a strategy for advancing geospatial data activities appropriate to the agency's mission. However, we found that USDA had not developed a strategy in accordance with the Act. When we spoke with OCIO officials, they indicated that they are waiting for the development of FGDC's strategic plan before publishing their strategy. As of July 2020, they were in the process of developing a strategy that will support the goals of the National Spatial Data Infrastructure strategic plan.<sup>15</sup> They anticipate completing it by the end of 2020.

The GDA also requires that agencies ensure that geospatial data are included on agency record schedules that have been approved by NARA.<sup>16</sup> A NARA records schedule instructs the agency on what type of records their datasets house, permanent or temporary, and how long they need to retain the records. Retaining these records is important for the American public so that citizens, public servants, Congress, and the courts can obtain the information they need to exercise their rights and responsibilities. However, our review disclosed that 13 of 16 datasets were not included on NARA-approved agency record schedules. Furthermore, the GDA requires that agencies use geospatial data standards, including standards for metadata. Our review also disclosed that 3 of the 16 datasets were not using geospatial data standards as required by the GDA.<sup>17</sup> For the three datasets, the dataset managers did not identify any geospatial standards that they were adhering to, and, in one instance, the agency indicated that it relied on the dataset

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<sup>13</sup> Government Accountability Office, GAO-14-704G, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government* (Sept. 2014).

<sup>14</sup> USDA Departmental Regulation 1110-002, *Management's Responsibility for Internal Control* (June 17, 2013).

<sup>15</sup> The strategic plan will provide a framework to improve the coordination and management of the Nation's geospatial assets and guide the further development of the National Spatial Data Infrastructure.

<sup>16</sup> NARA provides Federal agencies with guidance on proper record retention and archiving.

<sup>17</sup> The GDA-covered agency responsibilities do not specify which geospatial standards an agency should follow, including metadata standards. However, the FGDC has a list of endorsed standards that the agencies should comply with if the standards apply to their datasets.

managers to identify the best available science to follow. Additionally, we found that although all 16 datasets were following metadata standards required by the GDA, 15 of the datasets were not following the specific metadata standards required by a USDA Departmental Regulation, *Enterprise Geospatial Data Management*.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, the GDA requires geospatial data to be documented with the relevant metadata and made available through the GeoPlatform; however we found that for 1 of the 16 datasets, USDA did not make the metadata available through the GeoPlatform.

Finally, we noted USDA did not have Department-wide guidance for all covered agency responsibilities, even though we determined USDA complied with these remaining covered agency responsibilities. As a mechanism for an effective internal control system, management should implement control activities through the issuance of policies to ensure conformity to laws and regulations. Examples of these responsibilities included promoting the integration of geospatial data from all sources; allocating resources to support the activities of the FGDC; and using geospatial information to make information more useful to the public, enhance operations, and support decision making.

USDA was not compliant with all covered agency responsibilities of the GDA due to a lack of USDA-specific GDA guidance pertaining to the implementation of USDA's covered agency responsibilities. Specifically, USDA had not updated its Departmental Regulation to include the requirements of the GDA.<sup>19</sup> Additionally, departmental manuals had not been developed as required by the Departmental Regulation. Departmental manuals are used for detailed, high-level guidance that is procedural in nature, and without this additional guidance, agencies were unaware of how to implement GDA requirements. As a result, agencies experienced inconsistencies when implementing the GDA across USDA. For example, since USDA did not have guidance in place regarding the use of geospatial standards, USDA agencies were relying on their own expertise to determine what standard, if any, applied to the geospatial dataset, and some dataset managers chose not to implement approved geospatial standards.<sup>20</sup> Without appropriate policies and procedures in place, USDA does not have effective internal controls implemented for GDA oversight.

As a result, USDA is not completely fulfilling its role of improving Federal management, coordination, and utilization of geospatial data, which can negatively impact infrastructure and emergency response capabilities nationwide. Additionally, without the implementation of GDA policies and procedures, USDA will continue to see inconsistencies across the Department regarding GDA implementation. USDA generally agreed with our findings and indicated they are in the process of developing a strategic plan and anticipate having it completed by the end of the calendar year.

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<sup>18</sup> Departmental Regulation 3465-001, *Enterprise Geospatial Data Management* (Aug. 5, 2016), endorses the FGDC metadata standards, specifically International Organization for Standardization Standard 19115-1:2014, Geospatial Information—Metadata Part 1 Fundamentals, and Standard 19115-2:2009, Geospatial Information—Metadata Part 2 Extensions for Imagery and Gridded Data.

<sup>19</sup> Departmental Regulation 3465-001, *Enterprise Geospatial Data Management* (Aug. 5, 2016).

<sup>20</sup> Federal agencies that collect, use, or disseminate geographic information and/or carry out related spatial data activities shall use FGDC-endorsed standards both internally and through their activities involving partners, grants, and contracts.

## **Recommendation 1**

Develop and implement policy and procedures to ensure USDA geospatial datasets are adhering to requirements outlined in the GDA.

### **Agency Response**

OCIO generally concurs with the finding and recommendation in the report. OCIO will also develop and implement USDA-specific policy and procedures to adhere to requirements outlined in the GDA.

### **OIG Position**

We are unable to accept OCIO's management decision. To reach management decision, OCIO needs to provide a date for the estimated implementation of USDA-specific policy and procedures.

## **Recommendation 2**

Publish and implement a strategy for advancing geographic information and related geospatial data and activities in accordance with the GDA.

### **Agency Response**

OCIO generally concurs with the finding and recommendation in the report. Work is underway to complete the USDA Geospatial Strategic Plan and meet the stated Federal Geographic Data Committee target date of December 2020.

### **OIG Position**

We are unable to accept OCIO's management decision. To reach management decision, OCIO needs to provide a date for the publication and implementation of the USDA's strategy for advancing geographic information and related geospatial data and activities in accordance with the GDA.

## Scope and Methodology

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Inspectors General and the FGDC play an important role in overseeing compliance with the GDA. The Inspectors General considered whether they could conduct the audits as intended by the Act within the first 2-year cycle, as required by the Act. A working group convened and reviewed the language of the GDA, related OMB Circulars and Executive Orders, as well as publicly available documentation from the FGDC and a review of the Federal Data Strategy 2020 Action Plan, among others. Collectively, the Inspectors General identified challenges with conducting the audits as prescribed, which impacted the scope of the inaugural covered agency Inspectors General GDA audits and determined it would be in the best interest of the covered agencies for the respective Inspectors General to focus the inaugural GDA audits on the second audit requirement, as outlined in the Act, in order to assess the respective agency's progress toward compliance with the GDA. However, given the disparity of geospatial landscapes across the covered agencies, this recommended approach did not preclude covered agency Inspectors General from conducting either additional or more limited audit procedures related to the audit requirements, as outlined within the GDA.

For the purposes of USDA OIG's GDA audit, we adhered to the recommended CIGIE approach, solely focusing on USDA's compliance with the covered agency responsibilities outlined within Objective 2. The scope of the audit requirement included the fiscal years covered by the first 2-year audit requirement established within the GDA, which are fiscal years 2019 and 2020. Specifically, the scope of our audit work encompassed fiscal year 2020.

We conducted interviews and fieldwork in Washington, D.C. accompanied by meetings with responsible USDA agency officials.

We reviewed the 16 approved NDGA datasets under USDA for this audit. We established this as our universe due to the uncertainty of the applicability of the GDA. Not all Federal geospatial datasets are NGDAs. As such, the FGDC has expressed the need for clarification on whether the GDA applies to both NGDAs, as well as geospatial datasets not classified as NGDAs.

To accomplish our objectives, the audit team:

- researched the GDA and interviewed OCIO staff to gain an understanding of USDA's geospatial efforts;
- reviewed pertinent records related to USDA's implementation of geospatial standards;
- analyzed all 16 datasets to verify their adherence to geospatial standards and protection of personal privacy;
- met with staff and reviewed documentation for five USDA agencies including the Farm Service Agency, Forest Service, National Agricultural Statistics Service, Natural Resources Conservation Service, and OCIO to determine if USDA was in compliance with the covered agency responsibilities as outlined in the GDA;
- developed and sent a questionnaire to determine how USDA dataset managers address the covered agency responsibilities; and

- interviewed staff to determine the processes used to collect, maintain, disseminate, and preserve geospatial data.

We did not rely on information technology systems as authoritative sources for information reported in accordance with the GDA. Therefore, we did not perform any additional testing to evaluate the agency's information technology system used and make no representation as to the adequacy of the agency's information technology systems or the data represented within the systems.

We conducted this performance audit in accordance with Generally Accepted Government Auditing Standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objective. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objective.

## Abbreviations

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CIGIE.....	Council of the Inspectors General on Integrity and Efficiency
FGDC.....	Federal Geographic Data Committee
GDA.....	Geospatial Data Act
NARA.....	National Archives and Records Administration
NGDA.....	National Geospatial Data Assets
OCIO.....	Office of the Chief Information Officer
OIG.....	Office of Inspector General
OMB.....	Office of Management and Budget
USDA.....	United States Department of Agriculture

**OCIO'S  
RESPONSE TO AUDIT REPORT**





United States Department of Agriculture

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Office of the Inspector General

**FROM:** Gary S. Washington /s/  
Chief Information Officer  
Office of the Chief Information Officer

**SUBJECT:** Office of Inspector General Audit #50501-0023-12 “U.S. Department of Agriculture’s 2020 Compliance with the Geospatial Data Act”

The Office of the Chief Information Officer (OCIO) has reviewed the Office of the Inspector General’s (OIG) draft report, “U.S. Department of Agriculture’s 2020 Compliance with the Geospatial Data Act” #50501-0023-12.

We generally concur with the findings and recommendations in the report.

Work is underway to complete the USDA Geospatial Strategic Plan and meet the stated Federal Geographic Data Committee target date of December 2020. OCIO will also develop and implement USDA specific policy and procedures to adhere to requirements outlined in the Geospatial Data Act.

We look forward to receiving the final OIG report.

If additional information is needed, please contact Megen Davis, OCIO Audit Liaison, at (202) 631-1266.

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