GSA Acquisition Policy Federal Advisory Committee (GAP FAC) Acquisition Workforce Subcommittee Meeting

August 1, 2023

The GSA Acquisition Policy Federal Advisory Acquisition Workforce Subcommittee convened for a public meeting at 3:00 PM on August 1, 2023, virtually via Zoom, with Nicole Darnall, Chair, and Anne Rung, Co-Chair, presiding.

In accordance with FACA, as amended, 5 U.S.C. App 2, the meeting was open to the public from 3:00 P.M. to 5:00 P.M. EST

Committee Members Present:

Nicole Darnall, Chairperson	*Arizona State University*
Anne Rung, Co-Chairperson	*Varis, LLC*
Mark Hayden	*State of New Mexico*
David Malone	*City of St. Petersburg Florida*
Steven Schooner	*George Washington University*
Clyde Thompson	*GovStrive, LLC*

Absent: Gail Bassette, Darryl Daniels, Kristin Seaver

Guest Speakers & Presenters:

Michael Bloom	*General Services Administration*
Brennan Conaway	*General Services Administration*
Michael Cooper	*General Services Administration*
Steven Baker	*General Services Administration*

GSA Staff Present:

Stephanie Hardison	*Deputy Designated Federal Officer*
David Cochinnec	*GAP FAC Support*
Skylar Holloway	*GAP FAC Support*
Jennifer Hudson	*Closed Captioner*
Andrea Stermin	*ASL Interpreter*
Jill Lamoreaux	*ASL Interpreter*

CALL TO ORDER

Stephanie Hardison, Deputy Designated Federal Officer, opened the public meeting by welcoming the group before reminding the public that there will be time for comments and statements at the end of the meeting. Stephanie then performed a roll call to confirm attendance before turning the meeting over to Chairman Nicole Darnall.

Welcome & Opening Remarks

Chairman Nicole Darnall welcomed the subcommittee and thanked them for their participation. The meeting will consist of subject matter experts around technology and opportunities for automation within GSA, as the group thinks about embedding sustainability.

Anne Rung welcomed the group and clarified that today topics are to be framed around the current state of manual paper-based processes around sustainability and how automation could be a benefit to reduce or make these processes easier and how we could benefit from integration.

The speakers went around to introduce themselves before the subcommittee asked their questions.

Questions

Q: Anne Rung – What work is underway around integration, automation or sustainability?

A: Steven Baker – We are looking at ways to implement the GSA FAS policy that recently emerged on sustainable plastics. It will drive the affected change or cloud up GSAAdvantage with more gamesmanship which we see with vendor attested green icons. This is why we are pushing GSAAdvantage away from vendor-attested green data and solely relying on APIs where we get qualified product lists from whoever is managing that green icon. Within the next two weeks GSAAdvantage will work to migrate green icons to an enriched data set and remove the vendor attested data. The idea is transparency, standardization, and then accuracy.

Q: Nicole Darnall - How are the green icons appearing in GSAAdvantage?

A: Steven Baker - You can environmental aisle and filter them and search or you can find your item and it will show up. We will make it so all icons will filter to a G-SIM level. We will take the icons out of the vendor product level and move it up to the G-SIM and ensure the product is safe.

Q: Anne Rung - The plan is to do a bunch of APIs with third parties that own that certification?

A: Steven Baker - Our enrichment pipeline is from a company called XSB that reaches out to other agencies APIs and we plug those into the enrichment pipeline. If a vendor doesn't lie by trying to change the manufacturer name or the part number, we can then standardize the reach out, find the matches, and display it. This is where we make headway to try to make vendors quit playing the system.

Q: Nicole Darnall - If the goal is to make sustainable purchasing/acquisition the default, then what is the next step?

A: Steven Baker – The next step is to overhaul our search. We also talked about ranking green icons. The GSAAdvantage search is a powerful search and more education needs to be given to users.

Q: Anne Rung – How do suppliers feel about API automation?

A: Steven Baker – We are ensuring all of our needs are met before moving it out.

There is a sustainable packaging icon that is a vendor attested icon with no APIs or products lists, because it's not about the product, but about the vendor's shipping practice. There's conversations on what situations will keep the vendor attestation. I'm worried there's going to be gamesmanship in it, but it is easy to implement.

Q: Nicole Darnall – What else is there to be said about automation?

A: Michael Bloom – The work Steven and the team at FAS are doing on GSAAdvantage is some of the heaviest is a heavy lift to fix these issues. Using APIs to automate the inflow of information for certified sustainable products is what SFTools has been working on for some time now. We thought we had more of the solution in our pocket than we did in terms of collaborating with Steven and his team. He's been great in identifying gaps that exist. Many people come at this issue from the sustainability policy side and not the supply side of vendors. The registries for Energy Star, EP, BioPreferred, etc., were not designed as the place purchasers go to get information online. They are designed as receptacles of information to check boxes on whether or not vendors made an item that is certified. It is missing key data that allows us to automate the transition between knowing it's certified and wanting to know if it's certified. The challenge is to make the registries better whether they are federal, private, or third-party registries.

Q: Nicole Darnall – Can you give us an example?

A: Michael Bloom - EnergyStar has information about the energy use of every product in its registry which you can see. You can't see a picture of the light bulb they have or a point of contact for who the manufacturer is. Those are two elements people expect to be there.

Q: Anne Rung - Does EnergyStar have a marketplace where you can purchase or is it a repository of information?

A: Michael Bloom - It's a repository of information coming from registries where there is a lack of key information buyers expect if they were to see everything automated. Another example for registries is that when products are certified to be Greenguard certified or third-party standards, they are put in a test chamber and tested as an entire

product family. There's no information on manufacture name and part number that can pair with what we know because we have access to registries, and what a person seeking to buy a particular item can get.

Q: Anne Rung - If the products are labeled in GSAAdvantage, what is the use case in which a buyer needs to go to EnergyStar to see if a product is compliant?

A: Michael Bloom - Until GSAAdvantage is accurate in showing every federal purchaser what rules they need to apply, then we need to use all of the federal environmental programs.

Q: Steven Schooner – As someone thinking about the new proposed rule, how does the average acquisition professional think? The higher quality information resides in the SFTools and the GPC for those who have insight to go there and the determination to search for the right things. The high-volume buyers are more inclined to go through the schedule and will either find the environmental aisle or not. How do you envision integrating that to make it easy for the shopper?

A: Steven Baker – The goal is to link SFTool and GSAAdvantage. The first step is the standardization of the green icon. That was designed in place so when we get to the point where we can connect SFTool, we will pull all the data from SFTool because they are getting it from government APIs, plus some. Once we have that linked, we will be able to create a two-way connection between SFTool and GSAAdvantage. With that data connection being two ways, SFTool will become the data supply for the standardized green data used on GSAAdvantage.

Q: Nicole Darnall – What is needed to accelerate this plan? Who would be developing the data standard that is needed and what does that process look like?

A: Steven Baker – Boris A. has this report and can share it with the group.

A: Brennan Conaway – It was outlining what data we needed on our end to match products from environmental program registries to GSAAdvantage.

Q: Nicole Darnall – Who creates that standard?

A: Steven Baker – We have already created that standard. We have shared that memo with government agencies to integrate into their systems.

A: Michael Bloom - Every conversation with EPA, DOE, and USDA about labels and programs, everyone agrees the issue needs to be solved. We have yet to convene those three to do the work to tackle each category. The people care deeply and want to solve it, but they are also managing everything else. It's a capacity issue and it can't be a back burner. I think GAP FAC can shine that spotlight and show them the benefits of what can happen if they fix it soon.

Q: Steve Schooner – I can see the standardization of a qualified products list (QPL) and a global/national independent initiative to have standardization numbers after they've gone through the EPA pipeline, but I don't think the EPA team that does ecolabels is also in the numbering, labeling, standardization of the marketplace. Are we scratching the surface on a universal problem?

A: Steven Baker – If USDA, EnergyStar or someone else is going to provide a QPL, we need them all to have the same pieces of data stored in the same standard. We don't need a master repository; we need them all to do it the same.

Q: Nicole Darnall – We are talking about a protocol that each of the agencies need to follow?

A: Steven Baker – Correct.

Q: Nicole Darnall – Is the impediment to this coordination?

A: Michael Bloom – Yes, but there is a stick to it. EPA is looking at registries and requiring digital registries now. That is what EPA would recommend to the non-federal programs.

Q: Nicole Darnall – What would GSA's role be in this to drive this solution?

A: Steven Baker – GSA sells the products so it makes sense that they would be the agency to get everyone on board.

A: Michael Bloom – GSA setting standards would be a good play.

A: Brennan Conaway – We've been messaging this before, and we've pushed the boundaries of what we can do. Convening sounds like a lot given the role manufactures play. Continuing to encourage the adoption sounds reasonable.

Q: Nicole Darnall – What if GSA were to convene the relevant parties around a select number of ecolabels and test pilots how that standard could work?

A: Brennan Conaway - I'd be open to that, because in many ways we are doing that. It's the heart of what our offices are doing.

Q: Nicole Darnall – If you were given a budget to enrich an existing project, where would you allocate that money?

A: Steven Baker - It would be the standardization, because that is the issue with SFTools not being linked to GSAAdvantage.

Q: Steven Schooner - Is it more money to EPA's group that does ecolabels and standards or is it your organization that validates the schedule? Or is it something else?

A: Steven Baker - Looking at a GSA centric approach, it would be more money to link SFTool and GSAAdvantage without solving the underlying issue of data standardization. We could keep it internal and have it be a GSA product, but it's a heavy lift. If we solve the standardization issue by getting other agencies involved, it's less expenditure for GSA and more on the other agencies.

Q: Nicole Darnall – Is there a way that GSA could take that on?

A: Michael Bloom – What you're looking for is an office that doesn't exist and needs to be led by people who are feds, but with significant contractor support in order to do the hard work of data librarian stuff.

Q: Anne Rung – Even if we kept it within GSA and the project was integrating the SFTool to GSAAdvantage, you would still have to tackle the issue of data consistency, right?

A: Steven Baker – We started these conversations in January, and it would take a substantial amount to not get the greatest result. I wouldn't recommend going that route, but sometimes you do have to throw money at something to get a half result.

Q: Anne Rung – What's the half result? Is it because they don't have all the labels in the SFTool?

A: Steven Baker - You're looking for a specific product in which you can find it in the SFTool, but it might not have the part number or product. You need that information when purchasing. That data is coming from various government or company APIs.

A: Michael Bloom - If you solve the data standardization issue, you are also solving an issue within E-commerce that wants to do the same thing. If we get this right, the government would be standardizing something the market hasn't been able to do on its own.

A: Steven Baker - The market looks to us to standardize things, because we are the ones driving the green icons. We've done a poor job of standardizing and the market is suffering due to that.

Q: Nicole Darnall – Is there any low hanging fruit ahead of us?

A: Steven Baker – You're going to see changes over the next six months. Once those changes are in place, I'm sure sustainable packaging will be next up to be dealt with. Those are the low hanging fruits we are already working on. Past that, I would like to see standardization.

A: Michael Bloom – This committee has recommended doing a better job of letting people know these tools are there. That's great low hanging fruit and we can be clearer about what our current systems do and how they can use them. We can use help with

that from the committee. We are a small shop trying to get word out about a tool that's been around for 12 years. SFTool isn't required even though the guidance it gives is, but it's not a lot of reporting required by the federal government about if you bought the right thing. There could be more pressure put on in that area toward the federal buyers. SFTool could be used to buy the right thing and generate reporting.

Q: Nicole Darnall – Is there currently a mechanism in place to track the green spend? Would there need to be development around this?

A: Michael Bloom – We've built a tool for Sandia National Labs and piloted it over the last year and a half. It was presented to other departments of energy labs on how pleased they were with it and showcased the high-fidelity reporting. We have the tool, but we need an investment of agencies in order to have roll ups of projects done by contractors to show what has been done as a whole.

Q: Steven Schooner – Is there an opportunity for us to recommend expansion of cooperative purchasing or other communities that can access the environmental aisle, but not necessarily all the schedules? Is this a path we should be following?

A: Steven Baker - From a data standpoint on GSAAdvantage, it's something that is implementable. It's not a difficult ask. From a policy side, I'm not sure how well it would fly.

Review of Key Takeaways

Nicole opened the Jamboard for the subcommittee to reflect on the points and takeaways they heard from the guest speakers.

- How does this help the acquisition workforce with daily tasks related to sustainability? Are we too broad?
- GSA can play the role of convener.
- We need a multi-agency data standard, GSA can convene the discussions.
- Fixing lack of data standardization is top priority.
- Money won't solve the system integration problem. We need better data.
- Lack of standardization prevents integration of Advantage and SFTools. Eliminate false positives/negatives.
- GSA may need a new office of data management. Something that does not exist right now.
- Data standardization and accuracy are very complicated.
- Linking SFTool to GSAAdvantage. Mixed reaction among panelists about impact.
- Resources will be needed to clean up sustainability product data.
- How can private industry have a role in data standardization?
- Letting people know what systems are out there and how they work or use them.
- Education to the acquisition workforce on existing tools like SFTools.gov.

- Reporting/tracking – GSA currently tracks green spend, but the data isn't good.
- Safer Choice data are verified and so are the most robust, Energy Star is good, but has problems.
- Acquisition workforce needs to know about tools that exist – education/training.
- Some states are already doing this – let's let them tell us how. Selection of what to buy.
- Private industry (like Energy Star registry) and other Federal Agencies (like EPA) have a role to play in data standardization/clean-up.
- What does Europe do? They are always 10 years ahead of us.
- How does Amazon use their algorithm and can we apply it to our needs?

The group moved the conversation toward speakers. Based on the conversation they heard today, they compiled a list of speakers the subcommittee would like to hear from.

Public Engagement

Nicole Darnall opened the discussion up to the public, but there were no questions or comments.

Closing Remarks

Nicole Darnall thanked the subcommittee for their participation.

Adjournment

Stephanie Hardison adjourned the meeting at 5:00 P.M. EST.

Nicole Darnall   10/20/2023

Nicole Darnall
Chairperson
GAP FAC Acquisition Workforce Subcommittee

Anne Rung   10/31/2023

Anne Rung
Co-Chairperson
GAP FAC Acquisition Workforce Subcommittee