

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

**September 26, 2023**

The GSA Acquisition Policy Federal Advisory Acquisition Workforce Subcommittee convened for a public meeting at 3:00 PM on September 26, 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	<i>Arizona State University</i>
Anne Rung, Co-Chairperson	<i>Varis, LLC</i>
Mark Hayden	<i>State of New Mexico</i>
David Malone	<i>AquireIQ</i>
Steven Schooner	<i>George Washington University</i>
Clyde Thompson	<i>GovStrive, LLC</i>

**Absent:** Gail Bassette, Darryl Daniels, Kristin Seaver

### **Guest Speakers & Presenters:**

Savannah Kernc	<i>Document Imaging Dimension, Inc.</i>
Steve Noyes	<i>Noyes Associates</i>
Bill Murray	<i>ODP Business Solutions</i>

### **GSA Staff Present:**

Boris Arratia	<i>Designated Federal Officer</i>
Stephanie Hardison	<i>Deputy Designated Federal Officer</i>
David Cochennic	<i>GAP FAC Support</i>
Caryn Broome	<i>Closed Captioner</i>
Amber Bahler	<i>ASL Interpreter</i>
Rebecca Pearce	<i>ASL Interpreter</i>

## **CALL TO ORDER**

Boris Arratia, 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. Boris 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 to a unique session focused on empowering the acquisition workforce to prioritize environmental outcomes and sustainability with minimal effort. The session aims to engage vendors to improve understanding of green products and standards, as well as to identify barriers and opportunities for obtaining better data.

Co-Chair Anne Rung, emphasized the crucial role of suppliers in driving sustainable outcomes and expressed the desire to explore their experiences and perspectives.

### **Guest Speakers**

Savannah Kernc, the Chief Operating Officer for Document Imaging Dimensions, highlights the company's extensive experience as a GSA contractor, specializing in office supplies, shipping, and packaging. They serve various federal agencies, including the Department of Defense, EPA, and GSA, and have a strong online presence, selling products on platforms like GSA Advantage and DOD FedMall.

Steve Noyes, the President of Noyes Associates, discusses his involvement with organizations like Tri Industries and the Clover Imaging Group, specializing in remanufactured laser toner and inkjet supplies, sold under various brands. He emphasizes their role in recycling and reducing the carbon footprint. Steve's primary customer focus is the federal government, public sector, and business-to-government interactions.

### **Questions**

Q: Nicole Darnall – What challenges do you currently face in complying with Federal sustainability standards, both existing and potential ones, and how are you addressing them?

A: Savannah Kernc - As a small business contractor, we encounter several challenges when it comes to complying with sustainability standards. One of our major hurdles is identifying products that meet various sustainability criteria, such as CPG compliance, Bio-Preferred, and Energy Star. This is especially challenging because we're not the manufacturers of these products, and obtaining the necessary data can be quite a task. To address this, we need to source data from various suppliers, wholesalers, and manufacturers. While some information is readily available, a substantial portion requires manual verification, a process that can be time-consuming and complex, with the risk of inaccuracies.

Achieving data consistency is an ongoing challenge. Gathering data from different sources requires standardization to ensure it can be seamlessly integrated into our systems, making it accessible to our customers through platforms like GSA Advantage.

The final challenge is ensuring buyer compliance with sustainability regulations. Even if we put in substantial efforts to flag and market green products, our effectiveness largely depends on whether our customers are aware of and willing to adhere to these regulations. We've noticed varying levels of awareness and compliance among buyers, making this aspect a somewhat unpredictable factor in our sustainability compliance efforts. Our sustainability compliance hurdles encompass data acquisition and verification, data consistency, and the need for buyer education and adherence to sustainability standards.

Q: Nicole Darnall - Are you primarily sourcing data from websites, or do you also use supplier validation or scorecards in your data collection process?

A: Savannah Kernc - Our primary source of data is from our wholesalers who have direct connections with manufacturers. Beyond that, we rely on manual methods, such as checking websites to confirm and verify product information.

Q: Anne Rung - Is there a website you use for verifying products?

A: Savannah Kernc - To confirm compliance, we can for example engage in a manual process of visiting the EPA's CPG webpage, examining various product types, and verifying the information. In some cases, we may need to visit the manufacturer's website to extract relevant data for this verification.

Q: Anne Rung - Do government websites provide detailed information like manufacturer part numbers, photos and product attributes for easy product comparison?

A: Savannah Kernc - Government websites typically do not provide manufacturer part numbers and detailed product attributes for comparison. Having such information, including photos, would be helpful.

Q: Anne Rung - Steve, how do you verify products?

A: Steve Noyes - Clover has been verifying the country of origin for its products every 90 days for the next 90 days. Clover has some recommendations, including not specifying OEM-only on blanket purchase agreements and RFQs, enforcing GSA's taxonomy of terms, ensuring NSN indication, and adhering to MAS refresh policy number 6.

Q: Nicole Darnall - What are the pain points around complying with Federal sustainability standards? What is the higher level these different elements connect to?

A: Steve Noyes - The fair market price should be the highest level and highlights the issue of AbilityOne Skill Craft having the wrong SKUs based on September demand data. It would be beneficial to collaborate with GSA and the Commission to reformat the 215 NSNs to better align with the data.

Q: Nicole Darnall - Can you offer more details about having the wrong SKUs?

A: Steve Noyes - Demand data published on the Vendor Support Center indicates that AbilityOne Skill Craft's product offerings don't align with the installed base of printers in the market. Auditing and pricing top-selling items correctly is crucial to ensure affordability for consumers and dealer profitability. Achieving fair market prices for sustainability is important and highlights factors like country of origin compliance, TAA, section 89 policies, terminology, warranty support, reliable supply chains, and the issue of single-use plastics.

Q: Nicole Darnall - How does this connect to sustainability when talking about country of origin and other items?

A: Steve Noyes - The number of cartridge remanufacturers has diminished due to the influx of low-cost clones and non-OEM alternatives from China. There is importance of sustainability, particularly in addressing the issue of single-use plastics that cannot be repurposed.

Q: Nicole Darnall - The right data is not getting to the Federal Acquisition worker in order to make the right decision? Is that a very high-level statement of where this is headed?

A: Steve Noyes - Correct. We would like to be as clear as possible representing the product as accurately as possible to claim accomplishment for all the goals and purchasing objectives for sustainability.

A: Savannah Kernc - There is a strong influence of cost on government buyers' decisions due to budget constraints. Federal buyers may not intentionally choose China-made single-use plastics, but often opt for lower-priced options, which goes against sustainability goals and environmental concerns. There is a need for the government to strike a balance between price and the value of what they are purchasing. It's important to raise awareness and provide training to the Acquisition Workforce to make informed decisions that consider both cost and sustainability, as this has a significant impact on everyone involved.

Q: Steven Schooner - How much effort has been made to implement in regulation either a mandate or preference for reused cartridge?

A: Steve Noyes - Many buyers stick to their routine of automatically buying OEM products without considering alternatives. It's important to encourage buyers to pause and view the taxonomy and terms to consider remanufactured cartridges or green alternatives, pointing out the environmental procurement guidelines that promote such products. There needs to be more guidance with this.

Q: Nicole Darnall - How are we going to be able to figure this out in a seamless way, to manage additional priorities that are moving forward?

A: Steve Noyes - With the demand data that is published every other month, you can see what the volume is. Focusing the lens to ensure the language is correct and enforcement is conducted and having help and encouraging greater training, greater education, policy, encouragement, mandates would make a significant difference.

Q: Nicole Darnall - When you are selling through the government marketplace like GSA Advantage or other forms, how do you know what the green product standards are and how do you identify whether your products are meeting those standards?

A: Steve Noyes - Clover refurbishes printer cartridges, replacing components with new ones and filling them with new toner, achieving a product with 86-93% post-consumer waste. The technology has evolved over the years and everything is tested before it goes out with a three-year warranty. The cost saving potential is to 30% and hits sustainability goals and the AbilityOne goals.

A: Savannah Kernc - There are resources like GSA and SFTools that touch on environmental attributes. These resources direct users to government pages like EPA.gov, CPG (Comprehensive Procurement Guidelines), Energy Star, and Bio-Preferred, each with its own set of requirements. There is a manual verification process for compliance when specific information is not available from wholesalers or partners like Clover or AbilityOne. We manage and collect data, within the internal database for storing and utilizing this data in various procurement processes.

Savannah and Nicole agreed that a deficiency in data standardization exists. During a previous subcommittee, Steven Baker articulated their plan to develop an autonomous system capable of retrieving the necessary data. Nicole requested Steven to jump in to dive further into this.

Steven Baker mentioned that SF Tools is a government provided website where all the green data resides excluding product information. Currently they are working to link Verified Products Portal (VPP) to SF Tools to have all the information in one place. The FAS Catalog Platform (FCP) is a new portal they are developing to replace SIP/EDI. FCP will eventually link to VPP which will in turn link to SF Tool that is linked to GSA Advantage. There are companies that can manage and upload data into VPP on behalf of companies. In the future, FCP will have this existing data so the company no longer has to curate it.

Q: Savannah Kernc - What happens when contract catalogs are overwritten due to inaccurate information? Who's responsible and who will bear the financial burden if there are restocking fees or returns due to inaccuracy?

A: Steven Baker - I'm unsure what the contracting implications are. We've had huge strides in AbilityOne. There was an issue in AbilityOne where the incorrect product data for countries of origin was loaded into the system. Our biggest problem is with other vendors manipulating part numbers which cause your listings to get incorrectly enriched. On every GSA product page, there is a link where you can report inaccurate product information. We receive those and curate the catalog to show the proper changes.

Q: Nicole Darnall - What digital technologies do you use to help assist with your processes?

A: Savannah Kernc - We've attempted to use third party sites, but there is bad data at times so we stick to our own internal database.

A: Steve Noyes - Yes. Clover has an IT, marketing, and product management team that handles that. We have a storefront on Amazon as well as a landing page with DOE on FedCenter.gov. We are in the process of working through AbilityOne with a new website being approved. It is called Support The Mission with the purpose of helping you understand.

Q: Nicole Darnall - We've spoken about the notion of data standardization and GSA convening roles to help develop that process, but what other things do you see that might assist with this process?

A: Savannah Kernc - Once GSA is able to collect the data and pull it into GSA Advantage, has there been any talk or consideration for making similar data available to contractors? That would be great to incorporate into our own e-commerce website to make it widely available to others.

A: Steve Noyes - With enforcement, education, and standardization I would be cautious about green washing and make sure that claims are valid. There are vendors who might not be subject matter experts and can report inaccurate information, however there are vendors with the sole intention of being dishonest about product information to further their profits. Those are the people we need to be careful of. There is a quarterly roundtable to foster these discussions.

Q: Nicole Darnall - What is the formal name of the roundtable?

A: Steve Noyes - It was called the Quarterly Roundtable. Since 2016 the Region 2 team in New York has had a quarterly roundtable where manufacturers, Business Solutions Association, wholesalers, etc. and we would brainstorm ways to fix shared pain points.

Q: Nicole Darnall - If GSA convened this along with wholesalers, what was their goal and intentions and how does it connect to sustainability?

A: Steve Noyes - Sustainability is a spinal central issue that will always be a priority on the table. There is an agenda that governs the topics with presentations, questions, and pain points with follow ups.

Q: Nicole Darnall - With the increased focus on sustainability in the Federal government for vendors, what support are you going to need to comply with these rules? How can your community be more engaged in a productive way?

A: Steve Noyes - The team in Philadelphia has a Quality Partnership Council with a much broader quarterly meeting. There are the Industry Councils as well as GSA Expos that were terrific for education and connection. These three things would be very helpful.

A: Savannah Kernc - Providing training to have the contractors understand the requirements would be helpful. Keeping contractors in the loop is crucial.

Steve Noyes mentioned that Clover wouldn't have trouble complying with Federal rules. People with something to hide will have something to complain about.

Q: Anne Rung - Have you seen your products displayed in GSA Advantage? Do you think it's easy for the buyer to see when one of your products is green certified? How is that user experience?

A: Steve Noyes - Sometimes.

A: Savannah Kernc - Sometimes. Another part of it is if the buyer trusts the data.

Q: Nicole Darnall - Can you describe an example of successful collaborations or experiences working with other online platforms for selling your product or service? Are there places we should be looking at that are effective at identifying your products as being more sustainable?

A: Savannah Kernc - We don't have a good example since we rely on a lot of our own e-commerce site which is not perfect when it comes to sustainability due to the complexities.

A: Steve Noyes - I can send links as to what others (Office Depot, Staples, Target, Amazon, etc.) do with the categories and how they handle the remanufactured option to the OEM.

Q: Nicole Darnall - Is sustainable packaging a vendor level or manufacturer level qualifier for the product?

A: Savannah Kernc - I believe it would be manufacturer level since it's the packaging of that product.

A: Steve Noyes - It would be through the manufacturer. I can send you steps that Clover has taken to become more sustainable and greener with their packaging.

Q: Mark Hayden - How does the engine you have for CO2 reduction work?

A: Steve Noyes - Clover has an environmental sustainability website where you can calculate how many cartridges you purchased and the calculator will allow you to work on the reduction of your carbon footprint and points of plastic. It's a popular link for us since it shows you how many pounds of plastic you have kept out of the landfills. I can follow up with you on that.

Q: Mark Hayden - Can the consumer voice an opinion on how they would like a product to be packaged?

A: Savannah Kernc - Since we don't distribute, we rely on folks like Clover to distribute products for us. We can help to support those requests and push those initiatives, but at the end of the day it needs to go to the manufacturers and distributors.

A: Steve Noyes - We already do that. It can get challenging if folks are coming overseas since there could be a heavy gauge on plastic.

## **Review of Key Takeaways**

Nicole opened the Jamboard for the subcommittee to reflect on the points and takeaways they heard from the guest speakers. The group came up with the following:

- GSA may need to consider additional regulations to govern this effort.
- Current process is labor intensive. Get the data from wholesalers and use a website to verify the data. Consolidate the data and put it in a consistent form.
- Change management: It's hard to move fed buyers away from bias toward low price versus green.
- Suppliers are often required to pull data from multiple sources (manufacturers, multiple government websites) to identify their products as compliant or non-compliant.
- Poor monitoring and poor data creates opportunities for greenwashing.
- Multiple Sources: suppliers are often required to go to multiple sources for product information (manufacturers, various government websites) to identify their product as compliant.
- Suppliers have built their own database to track and manage green compliance.
- Data standardization.
- Government websites lack critical data elements for a supplier to easily identify a product as compliant.
- Buyer compliance has been a problem. Need stronger compliance mechanisms and training.



- GSA needs to enforce its taxonomy of terms.
- Industry can take the lead and the Federal government will provide the pressure. Things like packaging can change if someone important sends the message. How might we increase industry opportunities to communicate with GSA?
- Data is spread across EPA platforms, GSA platforms, and other agency platforms. It is not integrated.
- Duplication in validating product information across industry and the Acquisition Workforce.
- Addressing the challenges caused by bad actors.
- Pressure toward finding the lowest price can be an issue.
- We need to focus on best value and give that term meaning and measurement such as CO2 reduction and life cycle.
- Good opportunity for GSA to enforce existing requirements.
- Keeping suppliers in the conversation.
- More venues needed for contractor/wholesaler/manufacturer communities to come together and communicate with GSA. How might we make quality green data widely available?
- Production-level information is welcomed by the vendor community and it would help facilitate the federal acquisition workforce as well.

The subcommittee grouped the common ideas together to search for common themes with many points touching on prior discussions the subcommittee has had. The common feedback the group has been receiving is the lack of data and how it isn't being standardized or integrated which creates hurdles.

For the next public meeting, the subcommittee will be hearing from the IRS on their pilot program called DocScout as well as someone from NASA. For the next administrative meeting the group will be discussing an outline of some of the recommendations. They will merge together the feedback they have received and pain points to map out an outline. They will also determine if some items need to be set aside in order to have additional time to explore further.

### **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**

Boris Arratia adjourned the meeting at 5:00 P.M. EST.

I hereby certify that, to the best of my knowledge, the foregoing minutes are accurate and complete.

DocuSigned by:

*Nicole Darnall*

3/25/2024

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Nicole Darnall

Chairperson

GAP FAC Acquisition Workforce Subcommittee

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*Anne Rung*

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Co-Chairperson

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