



U.S. Department of Agriculture Office of Inspector General



USDA's Compliance with the Geospatial Data Act for Fiscal Year 2024

Audit Report 50501-0027-12

OIG reviewed USDA's compliance with the covered agency responsibilities specific to subsection 759(a) of the Geospatial Data Act.

OBJECTIVE

We determined USDA's compliance with the requirements of the covered agency responsibilities specific to subsection 759(a) of the Act.

REVIEWED

We reviewed USDA NGDA datasets and guidance and interviewed applicable personnel to determine USDA's compliance with the requirements outlined in the GDA for fiscal years 2023 and 2024.

RECOMMENDS

We recommend NRCS, in coordination with the EGMO, develop and use an applicable geospatial data standard for the National Cooperative Soil Survey Soil Characterization database dataset.

WHAT OIG FOUND

The purpose of the Geospatial Data Act of 2018 (GDA or 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. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) is 1 of 16 covered agencies under the Act. Within USDA's Office of the Chief Information Officer (OCIO), the Enterprise Geospatial Management Office (EGMO) oversees, coordinates, and facilitates USDA's implementation of geospatial policies, directives, requirements, and data management.

USDA has made significant progress towards compliance with the Act and was fully compliant with 12 of the 13 responsibilities governed by the GDA. However, we found that 1 of the 14 USDA National Geospatial Data Assets (NGDA) was not governed by geospatial data standards. Due to a lack of institutional knowledge, the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) did not identify an applicable geospatial data standard or other appropriate standards by which to align its dataset. As a result, USDA is not, in totality, fulfilling its role of improving Federal management, coordination, and utilization of geospatial data, which can negatively impact the Federal commitment to the conservation of the Nation's soil and water resources.

OCIO generally concurred with our recommendation.



OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL

United States Department of Agriculture



DATE: September 25, 2024

AUDIT

NUMBER: 50501-0027-12

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

ATTN: Sherry Golden
Audit Liaison Official

FROM: Janet Sorensen
Assistant Inspector General for Audit

SUBJECT: USDA's Compliance with the Geospatial Data Act for Fiscal Year 2024

This report presents the results of our audit of USDA's Compliance with the Geospatial Data Act for Fiscal Year 2024. Your written response to the official draft is included in its entirety at the end of the report. Based on your written response, we are accepting management decision for the recommendations in the report, and no further response to this office is necessary.

In accordance with Departmental Regulation 1720-1, final action needs to be taken within 1 year of the date of each management decision. Please follow your internal agency procedures in forwarding final action correspondence to the Office of the Chief Financial Officer.

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

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Background and Objective

Background

Until the enactment of the Geospatial Data Act of 2018 (GDA or the Act), the Executive branch had led nearly all efforts to better coordinate and share geospatial data¹ within the Federal Government.² 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.

The GDA applies to agencies, referred to as “covered agencies,” as Executive departments that collect, produce, acquire, maintain, distribute, use, or preserve geospatial data on paper or in electronic form to fulfill the mission of the Executive branch, either directly or through a relationship with another organization.³ USDA is 1 of 16 covered agencies.⁴ Currently, 4 USDA agencies participate in the management of 14 National Geospatial Data Assets⁵ (NGDAs): Farm Production and Conservation Business Center, Forest Service, National Agricultural Statistics Service, and Natural Resources Conservation Service.

Additionally, the USDA Chief Information Officer delegated executive leadership for geospatial technology, data, and information solutions to the Geospatial Information Officer (GIO). The GIO, located in the OCIO EGMO, is responsible for Departmental geospatial strategy, planning, coordination, assessment, and synchronization of all USDA geospatial data activities. EGMO provides enterprise-level leadership to align geospatial strategic planning, policy, tactical implementation, and operational capability with USDA’s mission requirements and performance goals.

¹ 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.

² 43 U.S.C. §§ 2801-2811.

³ 43 U.S.C. § 2801(3).

⁴ The Executive departments identified in 5 U.S.C. §101, 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 GDA also defines the National Aeronautics and Space Administration and the General Services Administration as covered agencies, and it excludes the Department of Defense.

⁵ *NGDA* is defined as a geospatial dataset that has been designated by the Federal Geographic Data Committee (FGDC) and meets at least one of the following criteria: supports mission goals of multiple Federal agencies, statutorily mandated, or supports Presidential priorities as expressed by Executive Order, or by OMB.

USDA appointed the GIO to serve as the policy-level official representing USDA at the Federal Geographic Data Committee (FGDC or Committee).⁶ This Committee 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, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) has a role in geospatial guidance. OMB and the Committee 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,⁷ 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.⁸ The Act 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.⁹ The FGDC has not established standards since the enactment of the GDA. However, many standards approved by the FGDC prior to the enactment of the GDA remain in use. In addition to the geospatial standard requirements outlined within the Act, the GDA also establishes covered agency responsibilities.¹⁰

As a requirement of the Act, FGDC is also responsible for developing the GeoPlatform to provide access to geospatial data and metadata for geospatial data to the general public.¹¹ The GeoPlatform is designed to promote data sharing and collaboration across Federal, State, Tribal,

⁶ 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.

⁷ 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 2805 of the GDA. Examples of themes include imagery, land use-land cover, and soils.

⁸ 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.

⁹ 43 U.S.C. § 2806.

¹⁰ 43 U.S.C. § 2808(a).

¹¹ The term “*metadata for geospatial data*” refers to information about geospatial data, including the content, source, vintage, accuracy, condition, projection, method of collection, and other characteristics or descriptions of the geospatial data.

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

Additionally, the Act requires the Inspectors General of covered agencies, not less than once every 2 years, to submit to Congress an audit of the collection, production, acquisition, maintenance, distribution, use, and preservation of geospatial data by the covered agency. This audit should include a review of the covered agency's compliance with: (1) the standards for geospatial data, including metadata for geospatial data, established under section 757; (2) the requirements under section 759(a); and (3) the limitation on the use of Federal funds under section 759A.¹² As of November 30, 2023, FGDC had not adopted or endorsed any standards required under section 757; therefore, our audit focused on USDA's compliance with the 13 agency responsibility requirements under section 759(a).¹³

GDA RESPONSIBILITIES

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.
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.

¹² The GDA was originally included as a component of the Federal Aviation Administration Reauthorization Act. As the GDA is now codified in 43 U.S.C. §§ 2801-2811, we cite the U.S.C. version of the GDA throughout this report.

¹³ 43 U.S.C. §§ 2801-2811.

Prior Audit Coverage

This is the third report in which we reviewed USDA's compliance with the GDA. In our most recent audit, in 2022, we again determined that USDA was not compliant with all the covered agency responsibilities.¹⁴ We issued a total of six recommendations and final action was completed on all six of the recommendations.

GDA RESPONSIBILITIES

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 meet 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.

¹⁴ Audit Report 50501-0026-12, *USDA's 2022 Compliance with the Geospatial Data Act for Fiscal Year 2022*, Sept. 2022.

Objective

Our objective was to determine USDA's compliance with the requirements of the covered agency responsibilities specific to subsection 759(a) of the Act.

Finding 1: Continued Improvement is Needed in the Use of Geospatial Data Standards

USDA was fully compliant with 12 of the 13 responsibilities governed by the GDA and has made considerable improvements towards compliance with the Act. However, we found that NRCS was not compliant with the use of geospatial data standards for 1 of the 14 USDA NGDAs. This occurred because NRCS did not identify an applicable geospatial data standard or other appropriate standards by which to align its dataset due to a lack of institutional knowledge. As a result, USDA is not, in totality, fulfilling its role of improving Federal management, coordination, and utilization of geospatial data, which can negatively impact the Federal commitment to the conservation of the Nation's soil and water resources.

Overall, USDA has made significant progress towards compliance with the requirements of the GDA, including the use of geospatial data standards for most NGDAs. Based, in part, on corrective actions implemented as a result of our previous audit,¹⁵ EGMO has developed a process to ensure that geospatial data standards are used for USDA NGDAs. For instance, these assets receive dedicated attention from USDA subject matter experts within the GDA community that discuss all NGDA standards. This community includes at least one USDA subject matter expert for each data theme involving data hosted by USDA. The EGMO GIO nominates the USDA subject matter expert who serves as a data theme champion.¹⁶ Based on our review, we noted that 13 of the 14 USDA NGDAs are now using geospatial data standards, compared to 7 of the 15 USDA NGDAs that were using geospatial data standards during our 2022 audit.

Non-Compliance with Responsibility 6, Standards

Our review found that one NGDA maintained by NRCS was not compliant with the use of geospatial data standards. Specifically, NRCS was not using geospatial data standards for the National Cooperative Soil Survey Soil Characterization database dataset, which is 1 of the 14 USDA NGDAs. NRCS noted a lack of capacity and expertise among its current staff, as previous staff who developed similar standards have retired. Thus, NRCS needs to rebuild institutional knowledge. Developing and documenting a standard will help ensure compliance with the GDA, which requires the use of data standards, and will facilitate the preservation of institutional knowledge.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ A member of the Senior Executive Service or a senior level individual designated by a Theme Lead Agency's Senior Agency Official for Geospatial Information, who advocates for, raises awareness of, and promotes the implementation of a NGDA Theme and its NGDA Datasets. An NGDA Theme Executive Champion provides recommendations to and advises the Senior Agency Official for Geospatial Information on, important matters relative to the NGDA Theme's role in the NGDA Portfolio.

Recommendation 1

We recommend the Natural Resources Conservation Service, in coordination with the Enterprise Geospatial Management Office, develop and use an applicable geospatial data standard for the National Cooperative Soil Survey Soil Characterization database dataset.

Agency Response

In its official response dated September 11, 2024, OCIO generally concurred with this recommendation. OCIO will direct EGMO to provide management oversight of and coordinate with NRCS in the development of a plan of action and milestones to establish and implement an applicable geospatial data standard for the National Cooperative Soil Survey Soil Characterization database dataset.

The estimated completion date is September 30, 2025.

OIG Position

OIG accepts management position for this recommendation.

Scope and Methodology

Inspectors General and FGDC play an important role in overseeing compliance with the GDA. The Council of the Inspectors General on Integrity and Efficiency (CIGIE) created a working group of representatives of covered agency Inspectors General. The working group's goal is to facilitate collaboration and consensus among the covered agencies' Inspectors General as they work to meet the Act's mandatory audit requirements. For the fiscal year 2022 audit cycle, the working group developed an audit guide detailing the requirements outlined in the Act and recommended audit testing methodologies. This same approach was used for the fiscal year 2024 audit cycle.

CIGIE determined that audits focused on the covered agencies' progress toward compliance with the GDA, specifically the agencies' compliance with subsection 759(a), would likely provide the best value to the covered agencies, Congress, and the public. This is a somewhat narrower approach than what the law requires because it is currently challenging to determine which standards the audits should use in evaluating compliance. The group approach allows each covered agency's Inspector General to perform additional testing based on the covered agency's geospatial footprint, if the relevant Office of Inspector General determines that additional testing is necessary (see Exhibit A).

For the purposes of our audit, we followed the recommended CIGIE approach. The audit scope included the fiscal years covered by the 2-year audit requirement established within the Act, which are fiscal years 2023 and 2024.

We performed our audit work from March 2023 through August 2024 and conducted interviews and fieldwork virtually, accompanied by meetings with responsible USDA agency officials throughout our audit. We discussed the results of our audit with management on September 5, 2024, and included their comments, as appropriate.

We reviewed the 14 approved NGDA datasets under USDA for this audit, which are listed in Exhibit B.

To accomplish our objectives, the audit team:

- researched the GDA and interviewed OCIO personnel to gain an understanding of USDA's geospatial efforts;
- reviewed pertinent records related to USDA's implementation of geospatial standards;
- analyzed all 14 datasets to verify their adherence to geospatial standards and protection of personal privacy;
- met with personnel and reviewed documentation for the OCIO and four USDA agencies, including the Farm Service Agency, Forest Service, National Agricultural Statistics Service, Natural Resources Conservation Service, and OCIO to determine whether USDA was in compliance with the covered agency responsibilities; and
- interviewed personnel to determine the processes used to collect, maintain, disseminate, and preserve geospatial data.

We assessed internal controls significant to the audit objective. In particular, we assessed:

Component	Principle
Control Activities	Management should implement control activities through policies.
Monitoring Activities	Management should establish and operate monitoring activities to monitor the internal control system and evaluate the results.

Because our review was limited to these internal control components and underlying principles, it may not have disclosed all internal control deficiencies that may have existed at the time of this audit.

We conducted this audit in accordance with Generally Accepted Government Auditing Standards. These standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our finding, conclusion, and recommendation based on our audit objective.

We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our finding, conclusion, and recommendation based on our audit objective.

Abbreviations

CIGIE.....	Council of the Inspectors General on Integrity and Efficiency
EGMO.....	Enterprise Geospatial Management Office
FGDC/ Committee.....	Federal Geographic Data Committee
GAO.....	Government Accountability Office
GDA/ the Act.....	Geospatial Data Act of 2018
GIO.....	Geospatial Information Officer
NGDA.....	National Geospatial Data Asset
NRCS.....	Natural Resources Conservation Service
OCIO.....	Office of the Chief Information Officer
OIG.....	Office of Inspector General
OMB.....	Office of Management and Budget
U.S.C.....	United States Code
USDA.....	United States Department of Agriculture

Exhibit A: CIGIE’s Geospatial Data Act Distinction Letter Submitted to the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation and the House Committee on Science, Space, and Technology



COUNCIL OF THE INSPECTORS GENERAL ON INTEGRITY AND EFFICIENCY

November 30, 2023

The Honorable Maria Cantwell
Chairwoman
The Honorable Ted Cruz
Ranking Member
Committee on Commerce, Science,
and Transportation
United States Senate
Washington, D.C.

The Honorable Frank Lucas
Chairman
The Honorable Zoe Lofgren
Ranking Member
Committee on Science, Space,
and Technology
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C.

Dear Chairpersons and Ranking Members:

The Council of the Inspectors General on Integrity and Efficiency (CIGIE) appreciates your leadership on geospatial data issues. The Geospatial Data Act of 2018¹ (the Act) mandates oversight through Federal Inspectors General (IG) to ensure effective implementation of the related requirements. Specifically, the Act requires biennial IG audits to evaluate the following:

1. Covered Agencies’ compliance with geospatial data and metadata standards established under the Act.
2. Covered Agencies’ compliance with responsibilities outlined in the Act.
3. Covered Agencies’ compliance with the limitation of Federal funding for noncompliant datasets.²

We are writing this letter on behalf of CIGIE to inform you about an important timing concern related to the biennial audits conducted by the IG community. The standards required for implementation of the Act by Covered Agencies have not yet been issued by the Federal Geographic Data Committee (FGDC). As of now, there is no projected release date available. Consequently, the full implementation of the Act is delayed, which in turn limits the IG community's ability to conduct a comprehensive biennial audit in Fiscal Year 2024. We cannot assess compliance with two of the three audit requirements (specifically, audit evaluation tasks 1 and 3 listed above). To address this challenge, CIGIE has taken proactive measures to establish a consensus within the IG community on an audit approach for the Fiscal Year 2024 audits.

After careful deliberation and similar to our prior audits, the Covered Agency IG representatives have concluded that audits focused on assessing the progress of Covered Agencies toward compliance with the Act, including their adherence to the Act's requirements outlined in section 759(a), 43 U.S.C. § 2808(a), would offer the most value to the covered agencies, Congress, and the Public.

¹ Pub. L. No. 115-254, Subtitle F (2018), codified at 43 U.S.C. §§ 2801-2811.

² 43 U.S.C. § 2808(c).

In our view, this approach is appropriate due to the inherent challenges in determining the precise standards that audits should utilize to assess compliance at this time. Moreover, it is important to note that the limitation on the use of Federal funds for noncompliant geospatial data will not apply until 5 years after FGDC's establishment of standards. As such, compliance with the limitation is not yet auditable.

This approach would provide each Covered Agency IG with the flexibility to conduct additional testing as needed, depending on the geospatial footprint of the respective covered agency. The relevant IG would make this determination as they see fit.

Furthermore, among the 16 federal agencies specified under the Act, more than half of them do not accumulate or publish substantial or significant volumes of new geospatial assets on a biennial basis. Consequently, many IG audit teams are contemplating the adoption of weighted or risk-based approaches. Additionally, the CIGIE Legislation Committee has encouraged Congress to repeal the requirement that IGs conduct a biennial audit to allow IGs the flexibility to assess the risks of geospatial data at the agencies they oversee and provide a cost-effective, risk-based review if appropriate.

Should you or your staffs have any questions about our approach or other aspects of our collective Geospatial Data Act oversight activities, please do not hesitate to contact us at 202-208-5475. In the alternative, please feel free to have your staff contact Andrew Cannarsa, CIGIE's Executive Director, at 202-292-2603.

Sincerely,



Mark L. Greenblatt
Chair, Council of the Inspectors General
on Integrity and Efficiency
Inspector General
U.S. Department of the Interior



Robert P. Storch
Chair, Council of the Inspectors General on
Integrity and Efficiency, Technology
Committee
Inspector General, U.S. Department of Defense

cc: The Honorable Gary C. Peters, Chairman
The Honorable Rand Paul, Ranking Member
Committee on Homeland Security and Government Affairs

The Honorable James Comer, Chairman
The Honorable Jamie Raskin, Ranking Member
House Committee on Oversight and Accountability

The Honorable Jason Miller, Deputy Director OMB and Executive Chair, Council of the
Inspectors General on Integrity and Efficiency

The Honorable Gene Dodaro, Comptroller General GAO

Exhibit B: USDA's NGDAs According to FGDC

NGDA

1. FS National Forest Dataset (US Forest Service Proclaimed Forests)
2. National Agriculture Imagery Program (NAIP) Imagery
3. CropScape - Cropland Data Layer
4. Forest Inventory and Analysis Database
5. LANDFIRE Environmental Site Potential
6. LANDFIRE Existing Vegetation Cover
7. LANDFIRE Fire Regime Groups
8. Monitoring Trends in Burn Severity Conterminous United States
9. LANDFIRE Forest Canopy Cover
10. Major Land Resource Areas (MLRA)
11. Soil Survey Geographic Database (SSURGO)
12. U.S. General Soil Map (STATSGO2)
13. NCSS Soil Characterization Database
14. Gridded Soil Survey Geographic (gSSURGO-30) Database for the Conterminous United States - 30 meter

**OCIO's
Response to Audit Report**



United States Department of Agriculture

Office of the
Secretary

Office of the Chief
Information Officer

1400 Independence
Avenue S.W.
Washington, DC
20250

TO: Janet Sorensen
Assistant Inspector General for Audit
Office of Inspector General

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

SUBJECT: Request for Management Decision Concurrence on Recommendation 1 of the Office of Inspector General Audit, 50501-0027-12, *U.S. Department of Agriculture, Office of the Chief Information Officer, USDA's Compliance with the Geospatial Data Act for Fiscal Year 2024.*

The Office of the Chief Information Officer (OCIO) is requesting Management Decision concurrence on recommendation 1 of 1 of the subject audit.

OCIO will direct its Enterprise Geospatial Management Office (EGMO) to provide management oversight of and coordinate with Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) in development of a plan of action to address the OIG recommendation. Specific actions to address the OIG finding are detailed below.

Recommendation 1:

Recommend NRCS, in coordination with the EGMO, develop and use an applicable geospatial data standard for the National Cooperative Soil Survey Soil Characterization database dataset.

OCIO Response:

USDA concurs with this recommendation.

Corrective Actions:

NRCS in coordination with EGMO will:

- Develop a plan of action and milestones to establish an applicable geospatial data standard for the NCSS Soil Characterization database dataset.
- Implement the applicable geospatial data standard for the NCSS Soil Characterization database dataset.

Estimated Completion Date: by September 30, 2025.

We shall continue to keep you posted of our progress on this recommendation.

If additional information is needed, please contact Angelo Rhodes, Director, IT Policy and Audits, via email at angelo.rhodes@usda.gov.

cc:

Kimberly Jackson, Deputy CIO
Christopher Simmons, OCFO, Director, Internal Control Division, OCFO
Aja Buckner, Management Analyst, OCFO
Angelo Rhodes, Director, IT Policy and Audits, OCIO
Sherry Golden, Audit Liaison Official, OCIO
Maria Tinker, Executive Assistant, OCIO
Ron Sequeira, Geospatial Information Officer, OCIO, EGMO
Sam Giles, Director, OCIO, EGMO
Christopher Alvares, Chief Data Officer

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