



## Plateau helps the U.S. Department of Agriculture maximize its training dollars

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

#### Challenge:

Use a single LMS as a system of record for all USDA training including mandatory, mission specific and discretionary. Deliver additional training to USDA's 29 agencies and staff offices while decreasing current training costs.

#### Solution:

Plateau Learning

#### Results:

- Consolidated 7 existing tracking systems
- Offers 5,000 courses to 140,000 employees and partners worldwide
- 1.1 million online completions in 2008
- 40,000 USDA employees use Individual Development Plans
- Cost avoidance/savings for 2008 approximately \$8 million
- Centralized view supports more strategic use of training dollars

In 2004, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) was using seven separate systems to track and manage training for nearly 140,000 employees worldwide, many of whom had different computers with separate software installed. Driven by leadership initiatives to consolidate and reduce IT systems and costs, USDA senior executive Chris Niedemayer conceived and initiated what is now known as AgLearn, one official LMS of record for all training. Program manager Stan Gray took the helm in 2006. "Before," says Gray, "the tracking systems were mainly repositories of training data." But by using the Plateau LMS platform, Gray notes that AgLearn has become, "an integral part of educating USDA employees and helps managers spend training dollars most effectively. Plus, through its functionality with skill gap assessment and competencies, we are beginning to align training with mission specific goal," according to Gray.

*"Plateau enables USDA managers to spend training dollars more effectively and is assisting in the alignment of training with mission specific goals."*

**SECURING BUY-IN:** Gray's vision was to use AgLearn to drive enterprise performance improvement across the entire USDA workforce. With training budgets already tight, getting the go-ahead for the extended utilization of AgLearn and supporting policy changes meant selling top management on the ROI AgLearn could deliver. Gray emphasized how the efficiencies and functionality of the Plateau LMS meant that one centralized system with an expanded online library of content could provide more training to USDA employees at much lower costs than traditional instructor led training. That has proven to be the case. USDA employees are very enthusiastic about the wealth of resources currently available to them, with over 5000 online courses and access to over 12000 books in AgLearn.

**MARKETING NEW LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES:** Seeking a dramatic increase in employee engagement, Gray's team formulated a robust marketing program that included periodic emails, sent via Plateau's notification feature, to employees highlighting training opportunities. Gray increased the relevance of – and response to – those emails by targeting communications to demographic groups that could best benefit from the promoted courses. In-person and virtual briefings were also held regularly. Onsite posters plus pop-up screens at the AgLearn portal further supported course visibility and value. In fact, course participation in promoted courses skyrocketed over 2000%.

**ENGAGING THE LEADERSHIP:** Not only is AgLearn marketed "bottom up" to employees, USDA also markets learning opportunities "top down." Gray says his staff regularly briefs senior political and career top-level officials on the wealth of training that can be accessed through AgLearn. With an accurate understanding of what's available,

### THE EXPERIENCE WITH PLATEAU

**Integration.** *"Plateau adapted to what USDA already had in place and to its internal processes."*

**ROI.** *"With 7 systems, no one had a good handle on how much USDA was spending on training. Now, with one platform, we are able see where the money is going so we can make strategic decisions."*

**More Variety.** *“Even with limited training dollars, USDA makes available over 5,000 online courses, with an additional 2,000 classroom offerings during the year.”*

**Buy-in.** *“USDA senior executives have embraced and promoted AgLearn as the official system of record for all training. This has led to key policy changes, including the ability to centrally track and report training dollars and to plan future training initiatives more strategically.”*

these upper-level contacts can take advantage of ongoing leadership training for them as well as promote AgLearn’s resources to those they manage and supervise. They can also become active proponents of performance development by encouraging supervisors to keep their teams’ skills aligned with the needs and goals that continue to evolve within the USDA.

*“In keeping AgLearn relevant, we value the Plateau survey functionality that lets us identify and evaluate the training needs of our audiences.”*

**USING LEARNING AS A STRATEGIC ASSET:** The USDA has implemented the use of Individual Development Plans (IDP) in AgLearn to track employee career goals as well as to identify knowledge and skill gaps that can be addressed and tracked within the LMS. With the integration of job specific competency assignments and assessments, employees can apply existing training resources to close existing skill gaps and more effectively manage their careers. In fact, over 40,000 employees currently have an active IDP in AgLearn and that number is growing.” However,” Gray points out, “as the use of AgLearn expands, so does the need for accurate data on how our population is using it.” Each online course offered in AgLearn has a Plateau survey attached to it, collecting data on how the user received the course, it’s relevance to job tasks and how effectively the course met its stated objectives. In keeping AgLearn relevant, we value the Plateau survey functionality that lets us identify and evaluate the training needs of our audiences.”

**SERVING EMPLOYEES FROM DAY ONE:** Plateau’s features such as assignment profiles also help AgLearn play an important role in on-boarding of new employees. A new-employee curriculum can be automatically assigned so that it’s ready the very first time the employee accesses AgLearn. Gray says “this means that new hires can quickly be brought up to speed.” In addition, all USDA agencies can provide consistent training to all new hires at a substantial per-user cost savings over traditional programs. Plus, notes Gray, “With the support of IDPs within Plateau, new USDA employees have a highly targeted, highly relevant learning path available to them on day one.”

**CONTINUING TO EVOLVE:** Gray’s vision for AgLearn extends beyond the individual learning experiences themselves. “We want to establish a variety of training opportunities and performance support tools for all our employees and partners,” he says. Plateau makes an important contribution to this objective by delivering resources that are available 24x7 wherever an Internet connection is present.