



STATE OF RHODE ISLAND
DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT
2009 NASCIO Award Submission: Government to Business

RI.GOV
DEM **AGRICULTURE PRODUCT ONLINE RENEWAL**



SECTION B - EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management (DEM), Division of Agriculture manages annual registration and renewal for over 14,000 agriculture products sold in the state, including pesticides, soil amendments, commercial animal feeds and fertilizers.

Historically, product renewal was a lengthy paper process. DEM mailed renewal packages to manufacturers for each product currently registered with the Department. The companies would then prepare the necessary documentation and return the package (again, via postal mail), including a corresponding check to cover renewal costs.

In 2005, DEM first approached Rhode Island Interactive (RII), the state's Web site and services provider, with the desire to automate the product renewal process. The goal was to develop an online solution that was convenient for customers, efficient for DEM, and cost-effective for the state.

In November 2005, the online renewal service was first launched, but initial results were disappointing. Adoption rates were low – there was no significant marketing or educational effort associated with the new service, and companies weren't sufficiently motivated to abandon their traditional methods of completing RI renewals. The application did not produce an immediate confirmation, and users suggested the fee schedule was hard to follow.

DEM did not abandon the project. DEM approached RII in early 2008 with the idea of evaluating and improving the user experience, analyzing DEM's internal processes, and making the online service the sole conduit for renewals.

Following analysis of the business processes, as well as updates and changes, the application was redesigned and re-launched in September 2008. Now, manufacturers complete renewals in a few simple steps, receive immediate confirmation of renewals, and the fee schedule is less complicated. Manufacturers also have access to phone and email customer support through RII and DEM during normal business hours. 100% adoption has meant DEM's internal renewal processing time has decreased from eight months to approximately six weeks, and reams of paper have been spared from use. Finally, the solution – from conception, to redesign and re-code, to its current iteration – was offered at no cost to DEM, through RII's unique self-funded partnership with the state of Rhode Island.



SECTION C - DESCRIPTION OF THE SOLUTION

The Problems

DEM's historical process meant staff spent weeks preparing renewal mailing packages, then months updating internal databases with product renewal information. The process also required manufacturers to prepare and mail documentation for every product being renewed, including submission of a physical hard-copy label. Companies had to submit a check for the renewal fees, which DEM employees had to reconcile and deposit. Once the renewals were successfully completed at DEM, renewal certificates were returned to the company by postal mail; the entire process often took weeks, leaving manufacturers waiting for renewal confirmation notification.

Take One

These issues were partially mitigated by the first online service, launched in 2005. However, low adoption meant DEM staffers were still handling a high volume of paper renewal forms. The online process also included cumbersome steps, such as requiring manufacturers to upload electronic copies of all product labels, and to understand a complicated fee schedule. Finally, an incomplete database meant that while the online service could list a manufacturer's current pesticide registrations, all other products had to be manually entered by the manufacturer, one by one.

Take Two

DEM approached RII in 2008 with hopes of re-examining the online service. RII worked closely with the DEM project team to analyze what aspects of the online service were most successful, what needed improvement, and how DEM processes could be streamlined. The project assessment and management process spanned three months, with frequent team meetings to discuss solutions and demo ongoing application progress. The resulting redesign including many improvements, including:

- Removing the product label upload requirement. Manufacturers now submit a CD-ROM with only those labels that have changed since the previous year, and attest to this submission in the online application.
- Simplifying the fee schedule, and offering manufacturers the option to pay securely by credit card or eCheck.
- Creating a cut-and-paste option for entering non-pesticide products (alleviating the burden of manufacturers entering products one by one).

The new agriculture application was launched in September, 2008. DEM prepared a detailed letter to communicate the new process to customers, and RII fielded calls and emails to explain the new service and offer manufacturers guidance on what to expect with the new process. Renewals commenced immediately after the letter from DEM was sent to manufacturers.

The Solution

Manufacturers can visit the Web service, available at www.ri.gov/DEM/agriculture, 24 hours a day, and enter their DEM-assigned company number. RII authenticates the company's valid identity based on a file provided by DEM. Customers then select the



types of products they would like to renew, enter product information, and select their payment method.

Once payment is complete, customers instantly receive a detailed receipt with a list of all products registered. The receipt serves as their proof of registration for that year.

RII is responsible for the code, design, and hosting of the online application; DEM is responsible for ownership and management of all company and product information. RII sends a nightly update of completed transactions to DEM, and this information is applied to the DEM backend database. RII also accepts a daily batch of manufacturer numbers from DEM, so that recently added companies have access to the application. RII sends a weekly remittance of funds to DEM based on the standard agreements established in the contract between RII and the state of Rhode Island.

The DEM/RII Partnership

The entire project – from conception, through analysis and re-launch – was completed at no direct cost to state government. All development, design and hosting costs were assumed by RII. As the state’s official Web provider, RII is responsible for RI.gov, the state’s Web home page, and over 100 online services currently available in Rhode Island. Rhode Island Interactive is a wholly owned, Providence-based subsidiary of the eGovernment firm NIC (NASDAQ: EGOV).

Due to Rhode Island Interactive’s unique funding model, all project management, design, development, hosting and marketing are offered at no cost to the state. This is true of all services provided. RII’s operational costs are funded by nominal enhanced access fee associated with some RII online services. In the case of agriculture product renewal, fees range from \$1 - \$5 per product. Funds generated support the above-referenced customer service and modifications to the application; additionally, these funds help support RII’s enterprise as a whole.

RII and the state identify projects collaboratively. Generally, RII assumes project management responsibilities, and is required to report progress to the partner agency and to RII’s state oversight board, comprised of members assigned by the state’s Chief Information Officer. A RII PMI-certified project manager led the DEM application redesign and relaunch in 2008. A project plan was submitted for state approval, a work breakdown structure was created, and work milestones reported to the DEM project team. These milestones include incorporating Web best practices to the extent possible; for the DEM application, this included Federal Section 508 Priority Level I accessibility and PCI/DSS Level I credit card payment security.

SECTION D - SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PROJECT

The DEM Online Agriculture Product Renewal application has significantly improved workflow and efficiency for a major state agency, at no taxpayer expense. The



application has significantly improved service delivery to businesses located across North America. The over 1,100 manufacturers selling products in the state of Rhode Island can now complete a renewal transaction in minutes, with instant renewal confirmation, meaning no interruption in product sales.

RI DEM is one of the first states to offer an online application for the renewal of all agriculture products, and the first to require all manufacturers to renew through the online conduit. The project is significant because it provides other states a model on which to base future efforts of this type. Through creative thinking, collaborative partnerships, and close process analysis, RII and DEM created an online service that improves efficiency and convenience for both the state and the manufacturers. The online service could easily be transferred to other states, given modest application adjustments to account for state-specific business rules.

The model is also sustainable. DEM intends to have all future renewals completed through the online application; changes or updates are financially supported through RII's self-funded model. Additionally, DEM hopes to expand the online application to include related transactions, such as the renewal of agriculture product applicator licenses.

The project is also significant because it improves efficiency with minimal infrastructure implications. RII leveraged DEM's existing equipment and software, while providing top-notch technology such as servers at an off-site level four data center to host the application. No infrastructure investments were required to create and manage this online application. Additionally, because RII automatically updates the DEM backend system, DEM staff can access and query all renewal information through their traditional processes – minimizing effects on established workflows.

The state's IT and enterprise architecture priorities include leveraging RII's technology expertise to the extent possible. For the DEM project, this included RII implementing their comprehensive secure payment system, which has processed over \$2 billion on behalf of the state since 2001. Both electronic debit (eCheck) and credit card payments are offered for online agriculture renewal payments. RII maintains the highest credit card security standards, including PCI/DSS Level I compliance, and offers transparent accounting and reporting that help the state easily reconcile deposited funds.

Finally, the application is significant because no legislative changes were necessary. DEM does require that all companies renew online, but mandatory participation was determined through rulemaking processes internal to the Department. All other process changes – such as electronic submission of labels, versus hard copies – were a result of creativity and flexibility on the part of DEM, who recognized that gaining maximum efficiency required compromise and innovation.



SECTION E - BENEFITS OF THE PROJECT

More Convenient for Customers

The online renewal application offers manufacturers a simpler renewal process, available 24 hours a day, with secure payment options and immediate renewal confirmation. The online transaction takes just minutes to complete. Pesticides manufacturers are presented a list of currently registered products, select 'yes' to renew (or 'no' to discontinue), pay, and receive a certificate of renewal. Manufacturers of non-pesticide products copy a product list from any common source (including Word, Excel and Access) and paste the list into the online application before payment and receipt.

By offering a comprehensive online solution, the state has greatly improved service delivery, and saved manufacturers time previously invested preparing and tracking hard copy documentation. Manufacturers also save money previously spent mailing renewal packages to DEM.

The application will be even more convenient in the years to come, as no product list upload will be required. RII and DEM are working together to create a product database for non-pesticides, so that manufacturers will have the yes/no renewal option currently available for pesticides.

Additionally, manufacturers have access to RII customer service during regular business hours, by phone or email, and a Web application that is straightforward, concise, and accessible.

More Efficient for DEM

The program has saved DEM employees hours previously devoted to data entry and mail handling. During the 2009 renewal cycle (September – February 2008) RII accommodated over 1,100 companies registering over 14,200 products – products that previously would have been manually entered into the DEM database. Over \$2 million was collected and automatically remitted to the state – revenue that previously would have been sent by paper check, reconciled, deposited, and vouchered in the state accounting system by DEM employees.

Five employees once spent almost eight months handling product renewals. Now, these same employees spend a week preparing the renewal notices, and intermittent time reviewing submitted renewals submitted online, auditing submitted CD-ROMs, and handling customer inquiries specific to DEM.

The online application has improved accounting and increased transparency. Historically, manufacturers would send in a paper check for the anticipated amount of their product renewals. If a product was not approved for renewal, or the check was submitted for the wrong total amount, a new check was required, or a lengthy refund process was necessary. Online, the total fees are calculated at the time the transaction is completed, and the application only accepts the correct amount in full. Additionally,



RII deposits all collected funds directly into the DEM's bank account and provides detailed reporting of all transactions completed for reconciliation purposes.

All customer service, user training and marketing resulting from this project have been assumed by RII. Given the staffing limitations at DEM, this support is of critical importance. RII fields all calls and emails related to the online service, walks users through the process, and communicates with DEM regularly. RII will continue to provide these services during all future renewal periods.

By relieving administrative burdens such as processing mailed renewals, DEM agriculture staff can devote more time to product regulation and oversight – the DEM Agriculture Division's primary responsibility.

More Green

The online application program has also spared the use of reams of paper traditionally associated with the renewal process. A brief letter to companies and a one-sheet renewal receipt are the only papers exchanged in this process, meaning notable environmental benefits were realized with this project.