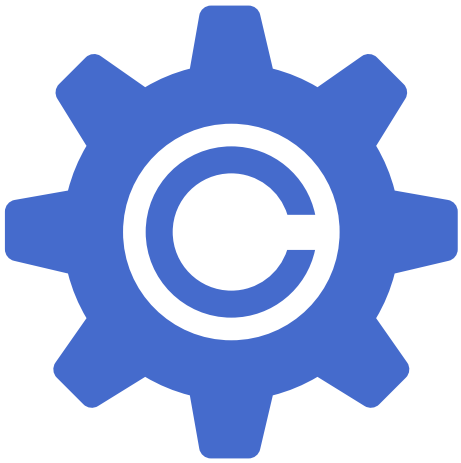
CASE STUDY

FPAC BC Design System



The Project:

The Farm Production and Conservation Business Center subsection of the USDA wanted to modernize their suite of four sites. The existing sites all had their own brand identity, were using different content management systems and were each operated by their own sub-departments within the USDA.

The Goals:

- Unify the fours sites with a cohesive look and feel
- Allow each site to maintain enough individuality to still be seen as its own entity
- Update the visuals to be clean and modern
- Meet WCAG standards

My Role:

As the Senior Visual Designer, it was my job to spearhead all visual redesign efforts, create the standard look, and ensure adoption across all assets.

My First Order of Business:

Let’s build a Design System!

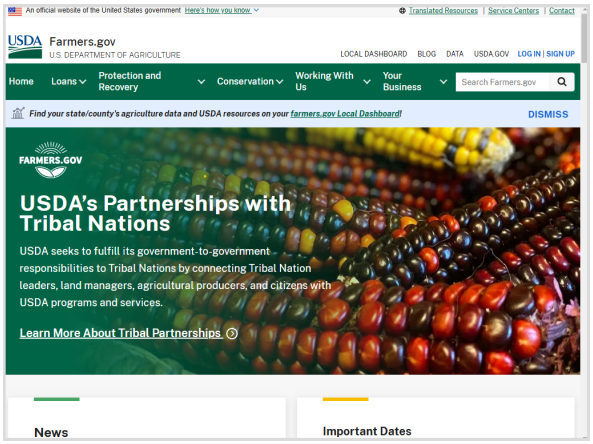
Phase One:

What are the existing design assets?

Since the sites in their current form were not following any brand standard or style guide, I looked to what other USDA and government sites were utilizing.

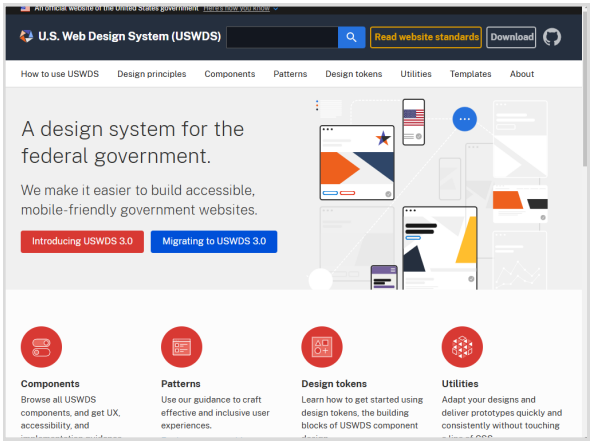
Farmers.gov

The USDA recently had their website Farmers.gov redesigned. They requested that the new sites follow a similar look and feel, but did not specify that we had to copy Farmers exactly.



The United States Web Design System

As a government entity, the USDA was encouraged to utilize the USWDS. It is a very comprehensive system with a large collection of components that are brand-agnostic



With these assets at our disposal, I proposed that we use the USWDS as our backbone for general web components. For our general styles we would use Farmers as a reference point.

Phase Two:

Colors as a visual identifier

I decided to leverage color as a way to give each site its own dash of individuality while still keeping some common threads woven throughout.

I started by doing some research to determine what colors were commonly used within similar sites around the web:

Risk Management Agency
Insurance sites. Extensive use of white with bright colors as accents. Almost all of them used blue in some capacity.

Farm Service Agency
Disaster relief and preparedness sites with a financial focus. Often utilized darker colors with a strong emphasis on grays and neutrals.

Natural Resources Conservation Services
Forestry and Conservation sites. Most used heavy dark colors as a base with one or two lighter accent colors.

FPACBC Main Site
This site was meant to be used by other USDA employees so I decided to use the same color palette as Farmers.

Armed with my references and research, I created a set of brand colors for each site which I then presented to stake holders:

Names and Hex Codes:

FPAC BC

Spring Green	Heritage Green	Big Sky	Dandelion
#2D8647	#006546	#1A5AD3	#F7BE00

RMA

Big Sky	Heritage Green	New Growth	Pale Sky
#1A5AD3	#006546	#B6E159	#82ABFA

FSA

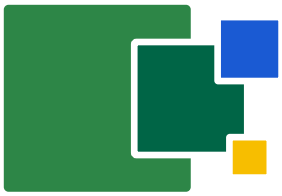
Cool Slate	Spring Green	Big Sky	Dandelion
#575E6C	#2D8647	#1A5AD3	#F7BE00

NRCS

Night Sky	Spring Green	Daffodil	Eco-Mint
#324364	#2D8647	#E8C261	#8CD7A2

Proportion & Hierarchy:

FPAC BC



RMA

FSA

NRCS

While each site got its own primary color, I decided to use Big Sky and either Spring or Heritage green in all of them to keep those threads of commonality.

Phase Three:

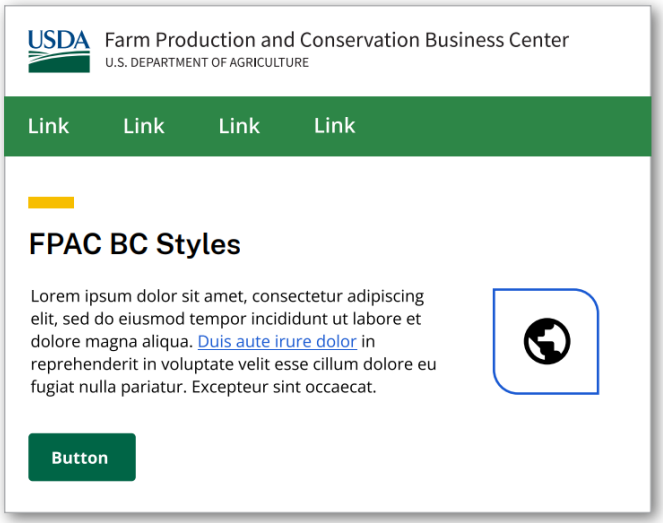
Assembling the Baseline Styles

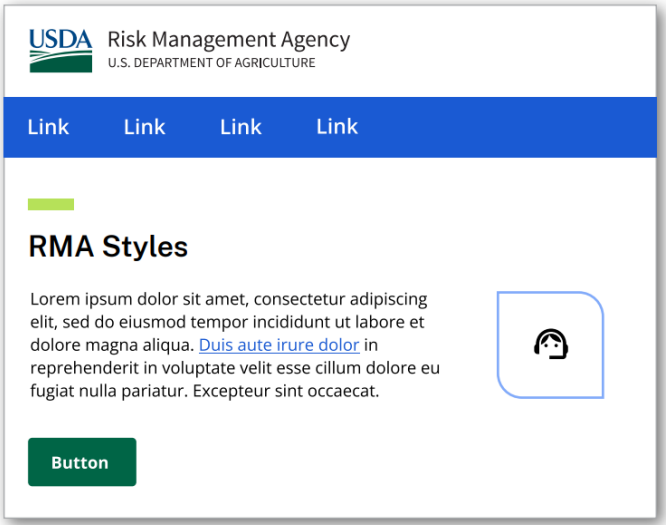
With colors approved, my next step was to establish a standard for the foundational design elements.

Pulling from Farmers and the USWDS I created initial specifications for the following:

- Color
- Typography
- Logo lockups and utilization
- Basic web components

I also created little mini mock-ups to show how some of these elements would work together.





Baseline styles document can be found here: https://waterworks-designs.com/images/DesignSystems/FPACBC-BaselineStyles.pdf

Phase Four:

From Baseline to Design System

Now that we had a foundation established and everything was approved, the building could begin. I created a list of every element and component we would need to create specifications for and my junior designer and I went to work.

First we created a master Figma file. Then, as we built out each piece we would create library assets for them that could be used in other Figma design files later on.

We also made sure to annotate everything extensively for our developers. Figma does have a way to export raw HTML/CSS from designs but in my past experience, that is rather unreliable. With my development background, I wanted to give them specifics that I knew would traslate over to code.

By the time our UX specialist was done preparing content for us to start building site pages, our Design System was ready and waiting!

Phase Five:

Expanding on a living document

A Design System is never finished.

After every sprint, I would go back and look at everything my team created and see if the Design System needed to be updates as a result. Sometimes this would mean changes to existing components; sometimes it would be adding in new elements.

Whatever it was, every change was logged and posted to the dev team so they could apply the changes to their code.

On a couple occasions I did a full Design System audit, going piece by piece to make sure everything was just the way we wanted it. For these larger updates we did a full version release with a very thorough changelog that included details on everything that was updated, changed, or in some cases, removed.

It Lives On

Although I am no longer working on this project, the Design System is still being used for further redesign efforts. As the foundation for all four sites in this suite, I expect it to continue to live on well into the future.