

## The Research Leader's Role in the Research Position Evaluation System

### Introduction

This brochure has been devised specifically to help supervisors of ARS research scientists recognize and fulfill their many responsibilities under the ARS Research Position Evaluation System (RPES). For convenience, the term Research Leader (RL) is used to refer to all such supervisors, whatever their actual job title might be.

### What is the RPES?

Details about RPES are available in P&P and Manual 431.3-ARS. A brief summary will suffice: RPES is a method for determining the grade levels of research (Category 1) scientists within ARS. Grade determinations are made by panels composed largely of research scientists, applying criteria of the U.S. Office of Personnel Management's Research Grade Evaluation Guide (RGEG). Classification information is provided to panels via a case writeup. An underlying feature is the "person-in-the-job concept," which links grade level to a scientist's professional qualifications, contributions, stature and impact.

As an RL, **you are a vital component of the RPES**, and you have definite responsibilities toward the scientists in your unit. Principal among these responsibilities are:

- keeping them informed about the system
- helping them prepare complete and accurate case writeups
- providing information to the panel via the indepth reviewer (IDR)
- discussing panel decisions with your scientists
- helping them plan strategies for their long-term career development

It's a big job, but you are not alone. There are many tools to help you: P&P and Manual 431.3-ARS, the online PowerPoint show series, RPES brochure series, and training and orientation sessions. In addition, you can get technical assistance from other RL's, from other managers in your Area, and from the Research Position Evaluation Staff in the ARS Human Resources Division.

### RPES Information and Case Writeup Planning

You must be sure that both New Hires and on-board scientists understand RPES fundamentals. Ensure that each of your scientists is aware of and bookmarks the RPES Home Page.

*Without fail*, discuss the RPES process with all New Hires as soon as possible after they have "settled in." Focus on the following topics:

- overall concept and principles of the system
- mandatory review cycles
- content and purpose of the case writeup
- the RGEG
- panel composition and operation
- choice of peer group

Explain system expectations at the current and next higher grade for each RGEG factor. Advise the New Hire to keep meticulous records to facilitate writeup preparation, and give practical examples of such records. Do not assume that on-board scientists are knowledgeable about RPES merely because their positions have been paneled before. Misinformation can persist, and some scientists may find it difficult to understand that their perceptions or expectations may not match system requirements.

Emphasize the many available sources of RPES information, meet with scientists to review their current case writeups, develop an approach to correct areas of weakness, and review their long-term career goals. Emphasize that *demonstrated impact of their research on important issues is one of the main features driving grade-level determinations*. Encourage scientists to complete the entire research process--from experimental design through technology transfer--to maximize the impact of their work. Ensure that the research assignment is clearly defined, yet broad enough to allow the scientist to have impact on its development. Counsel the scientist regarding assignment requirements. Failure to correctly explain an assignment up front can lead to erroneous approaches, lessened impact, and limited success as a scientist. Research assignments require planning, designing, and conducting research, and documenting accomplishments through publications, patents, technical reports, technology transfer activities, or other media.

As a position classification process, RPES is distinct and entirely separate from the annual performance appraisal system. However, you can use the annual performance appraisal to help scientists set and achieve goals which will strengthen their scientific impact and recognition. Careful attention to meeting or exceeding annual performance standard elements pertaining to research planning, execution, and reporting/technology transfer can lead directly to success (and avoid problems) under the RPES. This approach will be especially valuable if you can help the scientist understand how accomplishments and other contributions are evaluated within RPES, and what criteria must be met to advance to the next higher grade.

### **Case Writeup Preparation**

Case writeups are critical because they contain the only information most panelists will receive about the scientists other than the IDR factfinding report.

On receipt of the case writeup submission notice, first be sure that the scientist:

- is not a "poor performer"
- does not warrant delayed review
- should not be excluded from the scheduled mandatory review for any reason

The easiest way to help a scientist prepare a case writeup is to become familiar with requirements and restrictions detailed in Manual 431.3-ARS. If you serve on RPES panels, or have attended training/orientation sessions, you will be even better equipped to explain how panels evaluate each factor. Suggest that the scientist view the online PowerPoint show series and study Manual 431.3-ARS before starting to write the case. Emphasize writing the case so that *all* panelists will be able to understand it--**not** just panelists from their peer group. Urge the scientist to prepare the writeup "from scratch," or at the least, critically edit their most recent writeup rather than just "tacking on" recent information at the end. Each case submission is an opportunity to document impact, stature, and recognition. The significance of accomplishments can change with time as new technology is adopted. Ask for a completed draft writeup several weeks before the Area Office cutoff date. If, after scanning the draft, you believe the content is really "off base," consider providing the scientist with a solid case writeup to use as a model for improvement. Of course, if the writeup isn't your own, **be certain you have permission to use it!**

Read the writeup carefully to ensure it is in the proper format and contains only factual information. You share responsibility for ensuring that writeups clearly and accurately reflect the research assignment, supervision received and originality required.

Panels are not obligated to evaluate case writeups exactly as submitted. Sometimes, IDR factfinding establishes differences between the writeup and the real situation. When significant contradictions cannot be resolved to the panel's satisfaction during the panel meeting, an Insufficient Factual Basis decision will be reached and a revised writeup will have to be prepared for submission to a subsequent panel.

Remind the scientist that exaggerating contributions is a *big* mistake. Needlessly verbose and lengthy writeups will probably hurt rather than help their chances of a favorable review. The best approach is to be concise and factual. For example, if a scientist claims (in a Demonstrated Accomplishment statement) to have provided the first evidence of some important phenomenon, ensure that the statement clearly explains the situation prior to the accomplishment, describes the incumbent's role in the research (especially critical in team accomplishments), and delineates the impact of the accomplishment in the scientist's area of science or technology. Ensure clear description of the significance of accomplishments, identity of users of the research, or extent of use. Close attention in these areas can help panelists more readily evaluate accomplishments, and can also help you and other contacts intelligently discuss the scientist's accomplishments with the IDR. Finally, check Factor 4 of the writeup to ensure that insignificant items are not included in stature, recognition and advisory and consultant activities (reporting these weakens rather than strengthens the case).

You have probably prepared your own writeup and reviewed others. Use this experience in critically reviewing the draft. If you do not serve on panels, ask a panel-experienced scientist to review the draft and suggest improvements. (Remember that writeups are confidential—you must first obtain

permission from the scientist whose case is being reviewed.) You can also seek assistance from the Laboratory/Center Director, and persons in the Area Office responsible for approving case writeups (usually the Associate Area Director). People in these positions usually have considerable experience with RPES as panelists or Chairs, and can offer valuable advice. Line managers must review and approve the case anyway, but if given extra time to study the case they can often make additional helpful suggestions.

You may encounter situations where a scientist disagrees with or refuses to accept suggested changes. Try to resolve disagreements to the extent that accuracy and clarity are maintained. Agency policy (P&P 431.3-ARS) requires that, in the event of unresolved disputes, writeup content will be as the Area Director stipulates. Scientists are, however, permitted to append a statement of "their version" of the facts to the writeup as part of the official submission. There have also been a few instances of scientists refusing to prepare a writeup. Such refusal may constitute grounds for disciplinary action, and should be discussed with your servicing Employee Relations Specialist.

As a final step, review the names listed on the IDR contact sheet (ARS Form 570). The intent is to provide initial contacts to give the IDR a broad perspective of the scientist's career and accomplishments. Listing "important people" who know little or nothing about the scientist will not help. On the other hand, listing user group representatives is absolutely essential--they can give the IDR valuable insight into the practical, real-world impact of the scientist's work. Advise the scientist to let people on the contact list know that they may be contacted, when they may be contacted, and purpose of likely questions. You may also suggest that the scientist send copies of the case writeup (or at least pertinent parts) to listed persons.

When **you** are contacted by an IDR, provide factual responses to relevant questions, and opinions if and when asked. Do not offer or provide "personal" information about the scientist or work situation not relevant to the evaluation process. And, do not suggest what the panel decision should be or attempt to get the IDR to divulge their view on the case or likely panel decision--remember that the entire panel decides, not just the IDR.

### **Panel Reports and Career Development**

Your discussion of the RPES panel decision with the employee can provide critical input to a scientist's career growth. Upon receipt of the panel report from the Area Office, meet with the scientist to review the report and panel decision. If the panel reached an Upgrade decision, there will be no narrative report; your discussion should focus on future career steps to maintain growth and advancement. Each discussion must, of course, be tailored to the scientist's individual situation, but the following topics are broadly applicable and may be useful:

- the need for regional, national, or international prominence as the next step of broadening and strengthening stature
- the need for professional society involvement
- the importance of technology transfer in enhancing potential impact
- RGEN criteria differentiating between the new and next higher grade

For other types of decisions, narrative panel reports state why a panel reached a particular decision—they do not explain why a higher grade level was not assigned. (Doing so could lead to an erroneous impression that "all the scientist must do to get promoted is x, y, and z"). Study the report to see if it specifies any weaknesses which must be addressed to avoid future difficulties. Then review RGE criteria for the levels below and above those assigned by the panel. Discuss how the case can be strengthened before the next mandatory review. One technique is to annotate the margins of the current case writeup to indicate where additional or different activity might be helpful. Be careful not to leave the impression that if a scientist takes a certain course of action he/she will "surely" be promoted—RL suggestions are, after all, not binding on any future panel. Discuss current research plans and determine where good opportunities exist to demonstrate impact (including identification of appropriate user groups and technology to be transferred). Finally, help the scientist envision a multi-year strategy to attain goals which will also strengthen impact, stature, and recognition.

Scientists who aren't satisfied with the panel decision basically have three options: request approval for reevaluation or early review from the Area Director (details in P&P 431.3-ARS), or file a formal appeal with the USDA Office of Human Capital Management or OPM (details are in P&P 431.1). Explain these options, but be careful **not** to recommend pursuing one option in favor of another, or appear to urge or dissuade the scientist from pursuing dissatisfaction. Another word of caution: after the panel meeting, do not contact the IDR or any panelist in an attempt to learn details of panel deliberations, and do not allow members of your staff to do so.

### **Additional Information**

For additional information, consult P&P/Manual 431.3-ARS or the Research Position Evaluation Staff.

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