

The ARS Research Position Evaluation System (RPES)... An Overview

Introduction

Welcome to the USDA Agricultural Research Service (ARS). We are pleased you have joined us and we wish you success. The purpose of this pamphlet is to describe how ARS Category 1 research positions are evaluated and to emphasize the importance of this evaluation for satisfactory development of your career.

The grade level of your position determines your basic salary. Unlike most other Federal positions, grade levels for Category 1 scientists do not have a defined maximum promotion potential. Instead, the classification of your position is based on the Research Position Evaluation System (RPES). Details about RPES are provided in P&P and Manual 431.3-ARS. Briefly, the grade level of a position depends on the incumbent's qualifications and scientific contributions, termed the "person-in-the-job" concept. Your record of professional activity will be reviewed periodically by a panel that will decide whether your current grade level is accurate.

It is important to distinguish between RPES evaluations and performance appraisals. As described above, your grade level is decided by an RPES panel and the grade level determines your basic salary. However, there can be other salary adjustments that depend on the outcome of your annual performance appraisal. This appraisal, which will be done by your immediate supervisor, is required for all federal employees. The criteria used for performance appraisals are determined by line management officials at the beginning of each rating period. You will have an individualized standard that describes the level of activity expected for satisfactory performance of professional duties and for other important requirements of your job (such as efficient utilization of fiscal and human resources, support of EEO objectives and compliance with safety protocols). If you are rated as "Less Than Fully Successful" in a Critical Element of your performance standard, you will be denied RPES grade level review until the performance issue is resolved.

RPES Review Process

The review cycles are keyed to the position's current grade level: GS-12 and below, 3 years; GS/M-13, 4 years; GS/M-14 and above, 5 years. When circumstances dictate, Area Directors may approve Early or Delayed Review as exceptions to these cyclic intervals. RPES panels use evaluation criteria prescribed by the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM) Research Grade Evaluation Guide (RGEG). This document is the Government-wide classification standard for research positions. The RGEG defines the levels of responsibility, achievement, and activity that are typical for scientists holding positions of certain grades. The RPES panel will apply the RGEG to your position using an information package (termed "case writeup") that you prepare in conjunction with your supervisor and Area Director.

Case Writeups

Your case writeup is a critical document in RPES. It is your primary opportunity to illustrate how your job responsibility and performance have impacted the position you hold. The factors considered are: 1) Research Assignment; 2) Supervisory Controls; 3) Guidelines and Originality; 4) Contributions, Impact, and Stature. The four-factor format of the RGEG is explained in detail in Manual 431.3-ARS. It is your responsibility to be thoroughly knowledgeable of the contents of this manual. You should work closely with your supervisor in developing your case writeup. You can also discuss any questions with the Research Position Evaluation Staff.

Because the RGEG stresses the importance of an individual's contribution to a position, particular emphasis in the case writeup is placed on Factor 4 (Contributions, Impact, and Stature). You must provide detailed information regarding the *impact* of your most important research or research related accomplishments. This information will include evidence of the stature and recognition that has resulted from your accomplishments in a field of science or technology. Each accomplishment must be documented by research publications, patents, or supporting statements from knowledgeable authorities.

Panel Operations

After review by your supervisor and the Area Office, your case writeup will be evaluated by a panel of persons who have received specialized training in RPES procedures. The panel membership consists of a Chair, five ARS Category 1 scientists (GS/M-13 or above), and a Personnel Representative. At least two of the five scientists will be from a Peer Group actively working in a research area similar to yours. You select the Peer Group most appropriate for your work. One scientist will be designated the indepth reviewer (IDR) for your case. The IDR is responsible for verifying information in your writeup and for gathering other information that may be needed to determine the appropriate grade for your position. You provide a list of names that will be the starting point for factfinding. The IDR is not restricted to the list of suggested contacts, but must interview your immediate supervisor.

Prior to the meeting, each panelist will tentatively score your position. At the meeting the panelists will present their scores, hear the IDR report, and then seek to reach a final decision through deliberation. The most common decision options are to upgrade or to retain the position at its current grade. Panels operate under a consensus rule and all seven panelists have an equal voice. If the panelists cannot attain consensus, a split decision results and your case will be referred to the ARS Associate Administrator for Research Operations and Management for resolution. Occasionally, the panel determines that there is not enough factual information to apply the RGEG. In such instances the case cannot be evaluated because RPES panels have been delegated authority to determine grade levels only for research positions that are covered by the RGEG. The panel may also determine that a position is not functioning as a Category 1 research position, or is functioning below the current grade level. Management must develop a formal plan to resolve such problems.

All panel proceedings are confidential. After a consensus decision has been reached, the grade level determination will be sent to you through your supervisor. If you disagree with the panel's decision, you may submit a request for reevaluation through supervisory channels to your Area Director or file a formal classification appeal.

Additional Information

For additional details regarding RPES, consult P&P/Manual 431.3-ARS, your supervisor, or the Research Position Evaluation Staff.

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