

## **The ARS Research Position Evaluation System (RPES)... An Introduction**

Salary levels for research scientists in the USDA-Agricultural Research Service (ARS) are based on a position classification system having 15 grades and one ungraded pay level (ST). This system applies the U.S. Office of Personnel Management Research Grade Evaluation Guide (RGEG) to determine the grade level of research positions. The RGEG uses the "impact-of-the-person-in-the-job" concept, under which a scientist's professional qualifications, contributions, and stature directly affect position grade level. Beginning scientists will usually enter a position at GS-11 or -12, while a scientist with an international reputation and significant research accomplishments may impact a position above grade 15.

The initial grade level of a new scientist in ARS can be determined in one of two ways. Human resources specialists can classify positions up to GS-12 based upon the new employee's qualifications and scientific contributions. Initial appointments at grade 13 and above, and all subsequent promotions of research scientists within ARS, are based on review by a panel of scientists under the Research Position Evaluation System (RPES). Research positions are reviewed by RPES panels on a cyclic basis according to current grade level: grade 12 and below, every 3 years; grade 13, every 4 years; and grade 14 and above, every 5 years.

Each research scientist to be evaluated by an RPES panel prepares a detailed information package called a "case writeup." The case writeup consists of four parts and includes information about (1) the research assignment, (2) supervisory controls, (3) guidelines available and originality required to do the job, and (4) accomplishments, scientific impact, and recognition of the scientist being evaluated. The last part is very important because a scientist's qualifications and scientific contributions most significantly influence the position's grade. Thus a research position in ARS does not have a predetermined grade ceiling.

An RPES panel consists of seven persons including five scientists, a panel chair, and a personnel representative. At least two of the scientists on the panel will generally be in a field of science closely related to the scientist being reviewed. One scientist on the panel will be designated as an in-depth reviewer (IDR) for each case. The IDR verifies information presented in the case writeup and gathers additional information about the scientist's professional qualifications, contributions and stature through interviews with other scientists and officials familiar with the employee's work. The IDR presents a report of findings to the RPES panel, which then deliberates to reach a grade decision applying RGEG criteria. Thus grade level decisions for research positions in ARS are made by a panel of scientists rather than by the employee's supervisor.

For additional information concerning RPES, contact the Research Position Evaluation Staff.

(9/06)