

**U.S. Office of Personnel Management  
Office of Merit Systems Oversight and Effectiveness  
Classification Appeals and FLSA Programs**

**San Francisco Oversight Division**  
120 Howard Street, Room 760  
San Francisco, CA 94105

**Classification Appeal Decision  
Under Section 5112 of Title 5, United States Code**

<b>Appellant:</b>	[The appellant]
<b>Agency classification:</b>	Forestry Technician GS-462-7
<b>Organization:</b>	[The appellant's organization] U.S. Forest Service U.S. Department of Agriculture
<b>OPM decision:</b>	Forestry Technician GS-462-7
<b>OPM decision number:</b>	C-0462-07-03

\_\_\_\_\_  
Carlos A. Torrico  
Classification Appeals Officer

June 8, 2000  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

As provided in section 511.612 of title 5, Code of Federal Regulations, this decision constitutes a certificate that is mandatory and binding on all administrative, certifying, payroll, disbursing, and accounting officials of the government. The agency is responsible for reviewing its classification decisions for identical, similar, or related positions to ensure consistency with this decision. There is no right of further appeal. This decision is subject to discretionary review only under conditions and time limits specified in the Introduction to the Position Classification Standards, appendix 4, section G (address provided in appendix 4, section H).

**Decision sent to:**

[The appellant's address]

[The appellant's servicing personnel office]  
Personnel Officer  
U.S. Forest Service  
U.S. Department of Agriculture

Director, Human Resources  
[The appellant's regional office]  
U.S. Forest Service  
U.S. Department of Agriculture

Director  
Office of Human Resources Management  
U.S. Department of Agriculture  
J.L. Whitten Building, Room 316W  
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## **Introduction**

On November 29, 1999, the San Francisco Oversight Division of the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM) received a classification appeal from [the appellant]. On March 31, 2000, the appeal was transferred to OPM's Classification Appeals Program Office for adjudication and was returned to the San Francisco Oversight Division for final release of the decision. [The appellant's] position is classified as Forestry Technician, GS-462-7, but he believes it should be graded at the GS-9 level. The position is assigned to the [appellant's organization and installation] Ranger District, U.S. Forest Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture. Prior to appealing to OPM, [the appellant] appealed to the U.S. Forest Service, which sustained his current classification. We have accepted and decided this appeal under the provisions of section 5112 of title 5, United States Code (U.S.C.).

To help decide the appeal, an OPM representative conducted telephone interviews with the appellant and his immediate supervisor. In reaching our classification decision, we reviewed the information obtained during these interviews and all information submitted in writing by the appellant and his agency. As required by law, we classified the position based on its duties and responsibilities as compared to the criteria specified in the appropriate OPM classification standards and guidelines (5 U.S.C. 5106, 5107, and 5112).

## **General issues**

The appellant states that his official position description (PD) of record (PD# 99038) is a standardized PD developed by the agency that broadly describes his duties and responsibilities. As part of the appeal request, he provided several versions of a PD that contains more detailed information about his duties and is more descriptive than the agency's standardized PD. The appellant's supervisor has certified that the agency's standardized PD accurately reflects the duties performed by the appellant. During subsequent interviews with the appellant, he agreed that the official PD of record portrays his general duties.

A PD is the official record of the major duties and responsibilities assigned to a position by a responsible management official, i.e., a person with authority to assign work to a position. A position is the duties and responsibilities that make up the work performed by an employee. Appeal regulations permit OPM to decide an appeal on the basis of the actual duties and responsibilities assigned by management and performed by the employee. An OPM appeal decision classifies an operating position, and not simply the PD. Therefore, this decision is based on the actual work assigned to and performed by the appellant.

The appellant states that during the agency's evaluation of his position, he was not given credit for his expertise in helicopter management and management of the District's Knutsen-Vandenburg (KV) program and related Stand Treatment Database (STD). Qualifications are considered in classifying positions. However, these are qualifications required to perform current duties and responsibilities, not qualifications that appellants personally possess. In response to our questions about recruitment requirements for the position if it were vacant, the supervisor confirmed that forestry technician knowledge, contract administration, and skill in reading maps would serve as the paramount qualification factors for the position. Therefore, we cannot consider the appellant's personal

qualifications, except insofar as they are required to perform his current duties and responsibilities. While the appellant brings considerable skills to the position, the demands of the work, rather than his personal qualifications, govern the position's classification.

Both the appellant and his agency discuss his position by comparison to Forest Service internal guidance based on the position classification standard for the Forestry Technician Series, GS-462. However, we must classify positions solely by comparing the duties and responsibilities of the appellant's position to OPM standards and guidelines. Therefore, we cannot use the Forest Service guidance in deciding this appeal. We have considered the appellant's statements only insofar as they are relevant to making that comparison.

### **Position information**

The appellant's primary duties are to provide forestry technician support for reforestation and timber stand improvement (TSI) projects for the northernmost part of the [appellant's installation]. His reforestation efforts include determining planting needs, site preparation, plantation and cultivation, and seedling survival. Work associated with TSI projects include exams and treatments such as precommercial thinning, pruning, and aerial fertilization. Once decisions are made on how to proceed with reforestation and TSI efforts, much of the field work is contracted out. The appellant serves as the Contracting Officer's Representatives on these contracts, especially those involving helicopter usage due to his expertise as a helicopter manager. In addition, he uses PC and IBM computer programs and databases to collect information regarding the District's activities and accomplishments, specifically managing the KV plan and the STD among others. The appellant is supervised by the Assistant District Ranger for Natural Resources, a Supervisory Forester, GS-460-11.

The results of our interviews, the appellant's PD, and other material of record furnish much more information about his duties and responsibilities and how they are performed.

### **Series, title, and standard determination**

The appellant does not question the series or title of his position. We concur with the agency's determination that the duties performed by the appellant and the knowledge required for the position are best covered by the standard for the Forestry Technician Series, GS-462 (dated December 1991). The GS-462 standard notes that the criteria for determining the grade of GS-462 positions are contained in the Grade Level Guide for Aid and Technical Work in the Biological Sciences, GS-400 (dated December 1991). Therefore, the appellant's position is properly assigned to the GS-462 series, titled Forestry Technician, and evaluated using the GS-400 Guide.

### **Grade determination**

The GS-400 Guide uses the Factor Evaluation System (FES), which employs nine factors. Under the FES, each factor level description in a standard describes the minimum characteristics needed to receive credit for the described level. Therefore, if a position fails to meet the criteria in a factor level description in any significant aspect, it must be credited at a lower level. Conversely, the position may exceed those criteria in some aspects and still not be credited at a higher level.

In his appeal request, the appellant states that “he essentially agrees with the agency’s evaluation of factors 5 through 9.” We therefore discuss these factors briefly, while discussing factors 1, 2, 3, and 4 more thoroughly. Our evaluation with respect to the nine factors follows.

*Factor 1, Knowledge required by the position, Level 1-5, 750 points*

This factor measures the nature and extent of information or facts that an employee must understand to do acceptable work and the nature and extent of the skills needed to apply this knowledge.

Level 1-5 (described on pages 10-14 of the Guide) addresses knowledge of the technical methods and procedures related to the professional field(s) supported, of management practices, and of the agency’s policy and programs to lay out, schedule, organize, and execute the details of either: (1) a wide variety of types of limited operational projects incorporating diverse technical knowledges, e.g., limited projects requiring the application of appreciably dissimilar specialized methods, procedures, and/or techniques; and/or (2) one-at-a-time multiphased projects, at least some of which have nonstandard technical problems that the technician must coordinate with others to resolve, e.g., technical problems requiring the use of specialized, complicated techniques. At this level, technicians apply a practical knowledge of basic theories and practices of the scientific discipline(s) supported and must be adept at combining this knowledge with resourcefulness, initiative, and independent judgment in locating precedents and resolving the details inherent to application.

Technicians at Level 1-6 (pages 14-18) are recognized experts in a narrow specialty area of a scientific field. They have administrative and/or technical assignments, projects, and responsibility which are hard to distinguish from those assigned to the less experienced (but post-trainee) scientists employed in the same organization to perform standardized professional level research studies, projects, or assignments or to perform routine administrative or professional work in support of higher level research scientists or program/project managers. This level is more typical of those science technicians who demonstrably exceed the next lower level, particularly as recognized experts in a narrow specialty area of a scientific field or administrative responsibilities over a block of technical work.

Comparable to Level 1-5, the appellant’s position requires knowledge of the technical methods and procedures, management practices, agency policies and programs, as well as an extensive familiarity with the methods and practices of silviculture and forest management. These knowledges are used to schedule, organize, and execute projects relating to the reforestation and TSI efforts within the District. The appellant’s skills are also used in the administration of projects through database management, contract management, and an expertise in helicopter management for aerial fertilization

efforts. He combines this knowledge with his own resourcefulness and initiative and makes on-site field determinations regarding the species of tree to plant at a certain site, the procedures to follow when the survival rate of seedlings does not reach a certain threshold, the need for and extent of aerial fertilization, and the complexities of a site which are incorporated in contract provisions.

The GS-400 Guide explains that *all* technician positions cannot realistically be structured to reach Level 1-6 because of a variety of organizational reasons, including the amount and type of high level work available in the organization; the organization's willingness to delegate authority and controls for programs and projects; the availability, number, and/or assigned responsibilities of on-site professional workers, technician supervisors, or work leaders; ability of the technician; and other such limiting factors.

It is clear that the appellant's vast experience allows him to provide valuable support to the District's reforestation and TSI efforts. However, discussions with the supervisor, and review of the organizational chart provided by the agency, reveal that the existence of a Silviculture Technician, GS-9, within the same organization limits the appellant's authority and span of control. The GS-9 position serves as a project manager and is responsible for the effective planning and overall performance of all reforestation, timber stand protection, and timber stand improvement activities for the District. This is substantiated by the supervisor's assessment that the appellant and a Silviculture Technician, GS-7, work on portions of the District's programs; however, the GS-9 coordinates their portions into the larger overall program. Therefore, the appellant does not have the delegated authority and responsibility for design, coordination, and execution of projects typical of Level 1-6.

Although the appellant works on projects independently and reports to the Assistant District Ranger, the supervisor relies on the Silviculture Technician, GS-9, to coordinate the appellant's work with other work in the organizational unit. In turn, the appellant's supervisor uses knowledge of management practices and the agency's policies and programs to serve as the final authority for the District's reforestation and TSI programs.

This factor is evaluated at Level 1-5 and 750 points are credited.

*Factor 2, Supervisory controls, Level 2-3, 275 points*

This factor covers the nature and extent of direct or indirect controls exercised by the supervisor, the responsibility of the employee, and the degree to which work is reviewed by the supervisor.

At Level 2-3 (pages 19-20), the supervisor makes assignments by defining objectives, priorities, and deadlines and provides guidance with unusual assignments. The employee carries out successive steps to complete project requirements and objectives, seeks assistance as needed, and coordinates the work with others. The employee exercises initiative in developing solutions within established guidelines to resolve common problems, and refers significant technical or procedural problems to the supervisor or a higher level employee. Completed work is reviewed for technical soundness, appropriateness, and conformity to policy and requirements. Level 2-3 is the highest level for this factor described in the Guide.

Similar to Level 2-3, the appellant's supervisor outlines objectives and priorities and provides guidance on new policies and information as it relates to the District's overall programs. The appellant carries out the successive steps required for the reforestation and TSI projects that are assigned to him. He exercises initiative in resolving problems, especially when on-site field conditions conflict with the silviculturist's prescription. However, the appellant refers and discusses unclear issues with the supervisor. The appellant coordinates work efforts with others, including ensuring that contractor staff understand specific contract provisions that explain the complexities of a field site. He also works with recreation and wildlife specialists to avoid potential conflicts with aerial fertilization. The supervisor cited this situation as an instance where he and the appellant worked together to make schedule changes for aerial fertilization in order to meet both the District's TSI and recreational/wildlife needs. The supervisor relies on the technical soundness of the appellant's work and bases his decision-making on the appellant's collection of information.

Documentation submitted by the appellant states that he interprets and applies program policy and, therefore, exceeds Level 2-3. Examples provided by the appellant include work on the KV plan, recommendations for replanting based on a survival rate of trees, and pre-commercial thinning steps. However, any interpretations that the appellant makes are limited to the District's projects and do not affect the remainder of, nor become policy for, the entire Forest Service's efforts in these program areas. In addition, his suggestions for interpreting and applying these changes require some kind of review from the supervisor, either in an informal discussion on field changes or formal approval and submittal of the KV plan to higher level management within the District. This limits the appellant's independent interpretation of program policies.

The position fully meets but does not exceed Level 2-3 and 275 points are credited.

*Factor 3, Guidelines, Level 3-2, 125 points*

This factor covers the nature of guidelines and the judgment needed to apply them.

At Level 3-2 (pages 21-22), procedures for doing the work have been established and a number of specific guidelines are applicable. Guides may range from complex, standardized, codified regulations to maps, blueprints, standing operating procedures, oral instructions, equipment or instrument manuals, or standard scientific or technical texts. Judgment must be used in selecting appropriate guidelines because of the number, similarity, linkage, and overlapping nature of the guides. Guidelines contain criteria to solve the core question contained in the assignments, although the applicability may not be readily apparent. Further, technicians may also need to be especially resourceful in searching assigned guides; locating the controlling criteria; and applying it as specified, although the process of locating and selecting the applicable rule may be taxing and time consuming.

At Level 3-3 (page 22), employees work with new requirements or applications for which only general guidelines are available or with assignments where the most applicable guides are limited to general functional statements and/or work samples which are not always directly related to the core problem of the assignments, have gaps in specificity, or are otherwise not completely applicable. The employee exercises judgment independently in applying the guidelines or extending their applicability

to situations not specifically covered; uses guidelines as the basis for making procedural deviations from established administrative and/or technical methods; or otherwise adapts guidelines when judgment is exercised based on an understanding of the intent of the guidelines and reacting accordingly.

Guidelines used by the appellant include Forest Service manuals, handbooks, contracting guides, and other reference documents including the [installation's] Forest Plan and the KV Handbook. These guidelines fully meet Level 3-2 where the employee must use judgment in selecting the appropriate guideline because of the number, similarity, linkage, and overlapping nature of the guides. The appellant modifies these guidelines to make them site specific to situations in the Forest.

For the most part, these guidelines are more detailed than general functional statements and, like Level 3-2, are applicable to the core problems that the appellant encounters. For those rare instances where there are gaps in specificity, the appellant may recommend alternatives but these typically require supervisory or departmental approval. This limits the appellant's authority to independently extend their applicability to make procedural decisions.

The appellant cited several new or untried methods that he developed, which he believes exceed Level 3-2. However, the supervisor was only able to substantiate one of these methods – the transportable shade technique. Further discussions were held with the appellant to determine the nature and extent of the other new methods. The appellant stated that he proposed a survival exam quick plot contract due to a reduction in personnel; however, this occurred about five years ago. The technique for fertilization of sub-alpine standards for TSI is an adaptation of an existing technique being used for the Douglas Fir and is, therefore, not a new or unprecedented method. The appellant's development of new methods is rare and does not meet the intent of Level 3-3.

The position fully meets but does not exceed Level 3-2 and 125 points are credited.

*Factor 4, Complexity, Level 4-3, 150 points*

This factor covers the nature, number, variety, and intricacy of tasks, steps, processes, or methods in the work performed; the difficulty in identifying what needs to be done; and the difficulty and originality involved in performing the work.

At Level 4-3 (pages 23-24), the technician is responsible for a variety of assignments that involve differing and unrelated processes and methods. There exists a number of possible courses of action for planning as well as executing the work and the employee is given leeway or is otherwise expected to exercise discretion in choosing from among them. Judgment is required in applying a wide range of conventional, established approaches, methods, techniques and solutions to new situations. The technician: (1) identifies and recommends resolution of discrepancies in data based on a study of how the data interrelate; (2) adjusts work methods to accommodate unusual conditions; and/or (3) recommends or determines what data to use, record or report. Level 4-3 is the highest level for this factor described in the Guide.



Level 4-3 is commensurate with the way in which the appellant operates in conjunction with the District's organizational framework. The reforestation efforts performed by the appellant involve differing and unrelated processes and methods essential for improving timber stands within the District. Equally complex is the KV database which utilizes accounting processes to (1) balance the projects and funds requested with the amount of available funds per timber sale, (2) validate that the appropriate use of these funds is consistent with Regional and Forest directives, and (3) corroborate each fiscal year's needs when requesting KV and appropriated funding for Departmental annual budgets. The supervisor takes somewhat of a 'hands-off' approach and gives the employee leeway to identify problems, recommend solutions, and determine which data to use and report.

In documentation provided by the appellant, he contends that the variety of his work assignments augments the complexity of his position so that it exceeds Level 4-3. However, we find that the variety of reforestation and timber stand improvement efforts used by the appellant are equivalent to Level 4-3. The difficulty and originality of the work is ultimately managed by the supervisor, especially when socioeconomic and/or resource considerations are involved. The appellant serves as a watershed expert for the northernmost part of the Forest and, as a result, responds to environmental questions from the city of [name of local city]. However, most written responses to concerns that are raised by the general public or interest groups require some kind of supervisory review. Although the appellant is also responsible for tracking and monitoring a diverse set of projects within the KV plan, the supervisor is ultimately responsible for its approval and submission to the District Ranger.

The database management that the appellant performs is distinct from the forest technician work; however, this does not exceed Level 4-3. The STD and Geographic Information System databases incorporate different processes; however, the reports and the queries that the appellant typically produces from these databases are, for the most part, standard queries or are modifications of existing queries. In addition, although the appellant may suggest enhancements to the KV and may attempt to incorporate them upon approval, the majority of technological revisions to the KV and other databases is the responsibility of contractor staff. There is no evidence that this database management work involves the assessment and consideration of unprecedented situations and cases. On those rare occasions when this occurs, the situation is discussed with the supervisor, who exercises ultimate authority for making the final decision.

The position fully meets but does not exceed Level 4-3, and 150 points are credited.

*Factor 5, Scope and effect, Level 5-3, 150 points*

This factor covers the relationship between the nature of the work, i.e., the purpose, breadth, and depth of the assignment, and the effect of work products or services both within and outside the organization. The agency evaluated this factor at Level 5-3, which is the highest level for this factor described in the Guide, and we concur.

The appellant's position meets Level 5-3 (described on page 25 of the Guide), where the work involves applying conventional technical and administrative solutions and practices to a variety of

problems. The appellant is responsible for conducting surveys and exams, planning and implementing TSI and reforestation treatments, maintaining stand treatment data and records, and administering varied and complex service contracts. Like Level 5-3, the appellant's work products directly affect the design and operation of reforestation and TSI projects, and the program itself, within the District.

His work has significant influence on both the budget process and overall effectiveness of the District's land management goals and objectives.

This factor is evaluated at Level 5-3 and 150 points are credited.

*Factor 6, Personal contacts, and Factor 7, Purpose of contacts, Levels 6-2/7b, 75 points*

Factor 6 addresses the regular and recurring contacts with individuals outside the supervisory chain, and Factor 7 addresses the purpose of those contacts. The agency credited this factor with Levels 6-2/7b and we concur.

The appellant has contacts with individuals both within and outside the agency, including Forest, Regional and agency personnel; subject matter specialists in other areas of the organization; contractors; and the general public. Such contacts are comparable to Level 6-2 (pages 25-26) in that contacts at this level are with individuals or groups within and outside the agency on matters for which there is a routine working relationship. The appellant's contacts do not meet Level 6-3 (page 26) where contacts are made on a nonroutine basis and may include a variety of noted subject matter experts from other Federal agencies, universities, private foundations, and professional societies; influential local community leaders such as members of tribal governing bodies or comparable State or local government officials; newspaper, radio, and television reporters; legal representatives of private landowners; and representatives of organized landowner or special interest groups.

The purpose of the appellant's contacts meets Level 7b (pages 26-27). Like that level, his contacts are for the purpose of exchanging technical and operational information, developing activities, monitoring certain activities, resolving issues, ensuring protection of forest lands, and receiving input on assigned projects. At Level 7b, the purpose of the contacts is to plan and coordinate work efforts; explain the need to adhere to laws, rules, or contract or lease provisions; discuss inspected work and contract requirements when monitoring activity of contractors; discuss technical requirements of equipment with manufacturers and resolve problems concerning the work or the peculiar needs of the organization; interpret data obtained and explain its purpose; or reach agreement on operating problems such as recurring submission of inaccurate, untimely, incomplete, or irrelevant data. Like Level 7b, the persons contacted by the appellant are usually working toward a common goal and generally are reasonably cooperative. The appellant's contacts require tact and sensitivity in dealing with individuals having differing concerns and demands. The appellant's contacts do not require the skill necessary at Level 7c (page 27) where the purpose is to influence, motivate, interrogate, or control persons or groups.

These factors are evaluated at Levels 6-2/7b and credited with a total of 75 points.

*Factor 8, Physical demands, Level 8-2, 20 points*

This factor covers the requirements and physical demands placed on the employee by the work assignment. This includes physical characteristics and abilities and physical exertion involved in the work. The agency evaluated this factor at Level 8-2 (described on page 28 of the Guide), and we concur.

The appellant's work is sometimes sedentary; however, field work done by the appellant requires driving over mountainous roads and considerable walking and climbing over steep, uneven terrain. Long periods of physically demanding work may be required when the appellant is engaged in fire suppression activities. Thus the physical demands of the appellant's position meets Level 8-2 where the work requires some physical exertion, such as regular and recurring running, walking, or bending; or walking or climbing over rocky areas, through plowed fields or other uneven surfaces, through dense vegetation, and in mountainous terrain.

The appellant's position does not meet the intent of Level 8-3 (page 28) where the work requires regular and protracted periods of considerable and strenuous physical exertion such as carrying or lifting heavy objects; hacking passages through dense vegetation; or climbing ladders or scaffolds carrying heavy equipment used to install, maintain, or repair research installations.

This factor is evaluated at Level 8-2 and 20 points are credited.

*Factor 9, Work environment, Level 9-2, 20 points*

This factor considers the risks and discomforts in the employee's physical surroundings or the nature of the work assigned and the safety and occupational health regulations required. The agency evaluated this factor at Level 9-2 (pages 28-29), and we concur.

The appellant's work is performed in an office environment; however, similar to the description at Level 9-2, some of the appellant's work is performed outdoors and is subject to moderate risks associated with falls while working on steep and uneven terrain and with smoke, heat, and other fire-related conditions. The work environment for the appellant's position meets Level 9-2 where the work involves regular and recurring moderate risks or discomforts which require special safety precautions, e.g., working around machine parts, motorized carts, machines, or working with irritant chemicals. At this level, technicians are required to use protective clothing or gear, such as masks, gowns, coats, goggles, gloves, or shields to moderate risks or to follow procedures for minimizing risk.

The position does not meet Level 9-3 (page 29) where the work environment involves high risks with regular and recurring exposure to potentially dangerous situations or unusual environmental stress where high risk factors exist which cannot be reasonably controlled.

This factor is evaluated at Level 9-2 and 20 points are credited.

*Summary*

In summary, we have evaluated the appellant's position as shown in the following table.

<b>Factor</b>	<b>Level</b>	<b>Points</b>
1. Knowledge required by the position	1-5	750
2. Supervisory controls	2-3	275
3. Guidelines	3-2	125
4. Complexity	4-3	150
5. Scope and effect	5-3	150
6. and 7. Personal contacts and Purpose of contacts	6-2/7b	75
8. Physical demands	8-2	20
9. Work environment	9-2	20
<b>Total</b>		<b>1565</b>

The appellant's position warrants 1565 total points, which falls within the GS-7 range (1355-1600). Therefore, in accordance with the grade conversion table on page 4 of the GS-400 Guide, the position is properly graded at GS-7.

### **Decision**

The appellant's position is properly classified as Forestry Technician, GS-462-7.