

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



Atlanta Oversight Division  
75 Spring Street, SW., Room 972  
Atlanta, GA 30303

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

**Appellant:** [Appellant]

**Agency classification:** Agricultural Engineer  
GS-890-11

**Organization:** U.S. Department of Agriculture

**OPM decision:** Agricultural Engineer  
GS-890-11

**OPM decision number:** C-0890-11-01

\_\_\_\_\_  
Kathy W. Day  
Classification Appeals Officer

/s/ 3/15/99

\_\_\_\_\_  
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:**

[Appellant]

[Human Resources Manager]

Mr. Roger L. Bensey  
Director, Office of Human Resources  
Management  
U.S. Department of Agriculture  
J.L. Whitten Building, Room 316W  
1400 Independence Avenue, SW.  
Washington, DC 20250

## **Introduction**

On January 11, 1999, the Atlanta Oversight Division, U. S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM), accepted an appeal for the position of Agricultural Engineer, GS-890-11, [organization], U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA),[location]. The appellant is requesting that his position be classified as Agricultural Engineer, Natural Resource Engineer, Resource Conservation Engineer, or Environmental Engineer at the GS-12 level.

## **General issues**

The appellant contends that, as a result of the reorganization of the USDA, his agency's mission has changed significantly. The mission now involves a number of activities that are more closely related to environmental issues such as wetlands conservation, water quality, the abatement and control of water pollution resulting from animal waste and sedimentation, etc., and includes projects which are not specifically agricultural in nature such as drainage and erosion control in urban environments, flood control, and the construction of lakes and ponds for commercial and recreational purposes.

The appellant feels that the Agricultural Engineering Series, GS-890, standard is outdated and that the grade-level criteria are insufficient to accurately determine the grade for his position. However, the adequacy of grade-level criteria in OPM standards is not appealable (section 511.607 of title 5, Code of Federal Regulations).

## **Position information**

The appellant is assigned to position description number [#]. The appellant, supervisor and agency have certified to the accuracy of the position description.

The appellant serves as an Agricultural Engineer, GS-890-11, with the working title Area Engineer, for the [organizational location], Natural Resources Conservation Service. The position's primary functions are to provide leadership, technical and professional advice, and expertise on the engineering aspects of soil and water conservation and management projects, practices, and operations to Natural Resource Conservation Service field office personnel, landowners, land users, farmers, and other parties having concerns or problems in these areas. He works with district, area, and state conservationists and engineers to develop and coordinate engineering related activities in the resource conservation management system; spot checks and approves engineering work performed by lower level engineering and technician staff members to ensure conformity with standards and specifications; trains field office personnel in various phases of engineering work; interprets and modifies technical engineering standards and guides for use by field staff; and maintains contacts with the personnel of various Federal, state, and local agencies, universities, private engineering firms, equipment manufacturers, and vendors.

The appellant performs under the administrative supervision of the Area Conservationist who makes assignments in terms of broad individual projects and overall objectives. He independently plans and carries out work assignments, coordinating with others where necessary, and resolving the majority of problems that arise. The supervisor is apprised of problems that are controversial or that may

impact the general public. Technical direction and guidance on engineering-related matters is available from the State Conservation Engineer and the Assistant State Conservation Engineer and is generally given only on complex projects requiring approval at a level higher than the appellant. Completed work is accepted as technically correct and accurate and review, usually involving assignments requiring state office approval, is in terms of compliance with policy and the meeting of broad objectives.

### **Series determination**

The Agricultural Engineering Series, GS-890, includes professional positions which require primarily the application of the principles of engineering in combination with knowledge of one or more fields of agriculture. The work involves research, development, design, test, evaluation, and application of the fundamentals of engineering to aid in the solution of agricultural problems in such areas as farm structures, soil and water conservation, mechanical power and machinery, and electric power and processing.

The Environmental Engineering Series, GS-819, includes positions that involve professional engineering work to protect or improve air, land, and water resources in order to provide a clean and healthful environment. Such work requires the application of (a) professional knowledge of the principles, methods, and techniques of engineering concerned with facilities and systems for controlling pollution and protecting quality of resources and the environment, and (b) an understanding of and the ability to utilize pertinent aspects of chemistry, biological sciences, and public health that pertain to the control or elimination of pollutants.

This appellant's responsibilities are primarily concerned with the application of engineering principles to practices and projects related to the conservation and management of soil and water. This includes control and abatement of soil erosion and water pollution in activities associated with timberlands, large scale crop growing and confined livestock operations, commercial fish ponds, irrigation, drainage, and other agricultural activities. He also provides leadership, technical assistance, and professional advice on the planning, design, coordination, construction, and maintenance of structures and projects involving conservation management practices for wetlands preservation, irrigation, drainage, erosion and flood control, fire protection, storage and utilization of large quantities of animal waste, proper disposal of animal carcasses, and commercial and recreational lakes and ponds. He works with a number of conservation oriented programs such as the Environmental Quality Incentives Program, Wetlands Reserve Program, Watershed Surveys and Planning, Resource Conservation and Development, etc., which require the application of engineering expertise in solving soil and water conservation problems. The performance of the duties of this position require the application of principles of engineering combined with a knowledge of two or more agricultural specialties.

*The Classifier's Handbook* states that grade controlling work determines the series for most positions. The *Handbook* also observes that, for mixed positions, a number of factors may need to be considered to determine the proper series. These factors are the reason for the position's

existence, the paramount knowledge required, the organizational function, and recruitment sources.

The Natural Resources Conservation Service has national responsibility for helping America's farmers, ranchers, and other private landowners develop and carry out voluntary efforts to conserve and protect the nation's natural resources. The Service is the delivery arm for conservation for the USDA. The agency recruits individuals with a degree in professional engineering and at least 30 semester hours of course work in agriculture for this position.

Considering these factors, the Agricultural Engineering Series, GS-890, best represents the main purpose of the position and the paramount knowledge and experience required. The appropriate series for the appealed position is GS-890.

### **Title determination**

The authorized title for non-supervisory positions in the GS-890 series is *Agricultural Engineer*.

### **Standard determination**

Agricultural Engineering Series, GS-890, June 1967.

### **Grade determination**

Since supervisory duties account for less than 25 percent of the appellant's time, the position cannot be evaluated using the General Schedule Supervisory Guide.

The GS-890 standard is written in narrative format and uses two broad classification factors, *Nature of the assignment* and *Level of responsibility*, to determine grade levels. The position is evaluated as follows:

#### Nature of the assignment

This factor is primarily concerned with the degree of difficulty and complexity involved in the assignment. Among the elements considered under this factor are knowledges and skills required; the degree of planning and coordination involved; and the extent to which precedents, methods and techniques are available.

The appellant functions as the Area Engineer for [area] in the northern portion of the state which includes 24 counties covering an area stretching from [geographic location]. The appellant provides leadership, technical guidance, and expertise to area and field office staff, farmers, ranchers, landowners and land users, and other parties in carrying out the engineering phases of programs and projects concerned with soil and water conservation and management. He is responsible for ensuring that sound engineering practices are followed in the surveying, planning, designing, coordination,

installation, and construction of structures, and that practices related to controlling or preventing soil erosion, drainage, pollution problems, and water management for wetlands, croplands, timberlands, and in agricultural and urban environments are implemented. His responsibilities include conducting detailed spot checks of engineering work performed by field office staff to ensure conformance with standards and specifications; reviewing the work for adherence to technical standards; acting as approval authority for the engineering work performed by field office staff; and training field office staff on the engineering related facets of their work.

At the GS-11 level, agricultural engineers perform the full range of standard work assignments, and complete assignments requiring the planning and coordination of work of significant scope and complexity. The agricultural engineers at this level are full operating specialists in all of the conventional aspects of their profession. The technical methods they employ involve a thorough knowledge of available techniques and literature and they must also apply ingenuity in modifying and adapting standard procedures. The GS-11 engineers provide agricultural engineering assistance on soil and water problems to farmers, landowners, and others in a geographic location having a variety of engineering problems. For example, their work will involve complex projects requiring the planning and construction for drainage systems where lack of suitable outlets requires modification of standard drainage practices; erosion control in areas with problem soils; alternative design approaches for water control structures in areas with unstable foundation soils; or irrigation systems where soils present difficulties, the quantity of water may be inadequate, or the quality of water requires facilities for special treatment.

At the GS-12 level, agricultural engineers are recognized as mature and specialized workers equipped to deal with the advanced aspects or problems of their profession. The GS-12 engineer is distinguished from the GS-11 by the broader scope, greater depth of treatment, more varied subject matter, application of more critical judgment, and the increasing number of considerations which must be taken into account to make accurate decisions. Work is characterized by the occurrence of many variables which require application of a knowledge of diversified agricultural engineering principles and practices in a broad area of assignment. They must apply a high degree of judgment and originality in planning work, modifying procedures, and evaluating and making compromises with a number of alternate solutions.

The appellant's work exceeds the GS-11 level. As a result of the agency's reorganization, the appellant's assigned area of responsibility has been increased and is now a large geographic area comprised of 24 counties. The variety of soils, topography, agricultural enterprises, and geological characteristics presents a wide range of complex problems related to drainage, irrigation, soil erosion, flood control and water quality. The appellant typically must use a high degree of judgment and originality in adapting and modifying standard engineering practices to meet the unique challenges presented by the particular soil, topography, agricultural use, and geology of the area or a specific project site. For example, his work includes new and complex projects such as those involving the storage, treatment, and utilization of large amounts of animal waste, and the disposal of dead animals produced by large scale poultry and swine feeding facilities, beef feedlots, and dairies. He provides leadership and is responsible for the planning, design, and construction checks of facilities to store

and contain animal waste until used as fertilizer, ensuring that application of waste to farmland conforms with practices that prevent pollution of the soil, streams, and underground sources of drinking water, and he is responsible for planning, design, and construction checks of composters for the disposal of animal carcasses. He is responsible for agricultural and urban erosion, drainage and sediment control structures; flood control and prevention structures; dry fire hydrants used for turning ponds into water sources for firefighting in rural or unincorporated areas; and the siting of commercial fish ponds and recreational lakes. The appellant has also been heavily involved in designing special procedures, writing specifications, and developing new methods to resolve complex problems which, in some instances, were tried first by him and were later adopted throughout the state. For example, he led the design and use of the first low-cost treated wood water diversion structures in the state; the installation of corrugated plastic pipe to replace metal pipe in controlling erosion; and the use of hooded PVC pipes on dams with small drainage areas. Many of the new activities and programs in which he is involved, such as confined animal waste storage and utilization and water quality programs have broad guidelines. The appellant must develop methods, procedures, and standards based on similar operations and projects in other states and advise field office staff on applying these in their engineering work.

The GS-12 level is credited for this factor.

#### Level of responsibility

This factor includes consideration of the supervisory control exercised over the work; personal work contacts; and recommendations, decisions, commitments, and conclusions made by the employee.

At the GS-11 level, the engineer is expected to work without supervisory direction except in very difficult cases where a number of deviations from existing practices must be made. In these cases, such direction is given during the planning stages of the project rather than as the work progresses. Completed work is spot checked for technical adequacy and conformance with policy and regulations. Work relationships and contacts are made to exchange ideas or information regarding projects and to assure that assigned work is compatible with related activities being performed by the engineers in other bureaus or agencies. Contacts are typically with contractors, state agencies, and private groups to explain procedures and obtain cooperation. Engineers at this level must use tact and diplomacy to obtain agreement on controversial issues in contacts with contractors and groups.

At the GS-12 level, instructions are given in terms of broad objectives and relative priority for completion of work. Engineers at this level work with considerable freedom from technical control and are responsible for selecting the proper engineering methods and carrying assignments through to completion. Technical guidance is limited except for controversial issues which may have an impact on agency policy, and completed work is reviewed for adequacy in terms of meeting broad organizational objectives and for compliance with established policies. The GS-12 Agricultural Engineer maintains liaison with officials in other Federal departments and bureaus, state and local governments, universities, private contractors, and the general public. These activities often constitute a considerable portion of the work of positions at GS-12. As compared to the GS-11 level,

there are considerably more contacts at GS-12 to resolve problems which involve basic program differences. Decisions and recommendations based on the application of standard engineering practices are rarely changed by higher authority other than for reasons of policy, public relations, or budgetary considerations.

The GS-11 level is met. The appellant is supervised administratively by the Area Conservationist. Work is assigned in terms of broad overall objectives and the appellant is responsible for setting and informing the supervisor of priorities and deadlines, resolving the majority of the problems that arise, and carrying conventional assignments through to completion. The supervisor is kept informed of any controversial issues that may arise and may impact the general public. Technical guidance is provided by the State Conservation Engineer and the Assistant State Conservation Engineer who review completed work in terms of broad objectives and have approval authority for work exceeding the appellant's level of authority.

The GS-12 level is not met. The appellant works with a degree of independence from technical supervision which is somewhat similar to that found at GS-12; and he has contacts with field office personnel, landowners, land users, officials of other Federal agencies and state and local governmental bodies. However, these contacts do not require the appellant to spend a considerable portion of the time resolving program differences as described at the GS-12 level. His contacts are primarily for providing and receiving information, coordinating work, resolving problems, and gaining cooperation. They often involve explaining regulatory procedures and requirements to contractors, landowners, and land users who must be convinced that the methods and practices he proposes are required by permit granting agencies, are more appropriate for a specific site, are more economical, or are the only viable alternative (e.g., advising the owners of confined animal facilities of requirements that must be met before the State Health Department or Department of Environmental Quality will grant permits; convincing parties desiring a lake, pond, or surface water storage area that soil or geological conditions make their site unsuitable; or convincing the owners of a lake whose levee has failed that a different design is both more appropriate and economical than the one they prefer). Additionally, the approval process within the appellant's agency requires that issues that are controversial or involve program differences be reviewed and approved at the state office level or escalated to a higher level. Therefore the GS-12 level is not fully met and cannot be credited.

This factor is credited at the GS-11 level.

## **Summary**

Nature of assignment equates to the GS-12 level and Level of responsibility is credited at the GS-11 level. Both elements must be fully met at the same grade level to establish the grade. Consistent with OPM guidelines, the lower of the two grade levels controls the final grade of the position.

## **Decision**

The position is correctly classified as Agricultural Engineer, GS-890-11.