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SUBJECT: Classification of Category 3 Support Scientist Positions

TO: Area Directors
Area Administrative Officers

FROM: Karen M. Brownell /s/
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We have recently received several questions concerning the classification of support scientist positions (also referred to as Category 3s) in the Agricultural Research Service and decided to distribute this reiteration of agency policy on this subject.

Category 3 positions are defined as professional scientist positions which provide direct support or service to one or more Category 1 or 4 positions. The work of such positions is characterized by responsible involvement in one or more, but not ALL, phases of research (particularly not the problem selection and definition phases); and responsible participation in analysis and preliminary interpretation of data (but not including responsibility for final interpretation and conclusion which relate the results to the field of research involved). Examples include but are not limited to: conducting literature searches, selecting procedures and conducting experiments, collecting and analyzing data or specimens, and/or preparing technical reports. Positive education and specialized experience requirements must be met in order to qualify for such positions.

Typically, Category 3 career ladders encompass a GS-5 through GS-11, 2-grade interval progression, or variations thereof (e.g., GS-5/7/9, GS-7/9, GS-7/9/11, etc.); the established full performance level (FPL) of support scientist positions **will not exceed GS-11**. Establishment of such positions is at the discretion of the immediate supervisor with concurrence of management. The decision should be based on the assessment of the staffing complement needed to accomplish assigned research objectives and the availability of duties required to meet the FPL. Sample standard position descriptions for Category 3 career ladder positions in the GS-403 Microbiology and GS-1320 Chemistry Series can be found at: www.afm.ars.usda/hrd/Classification/positions/index.htm

The Agency maintains that any support scientist position operating above the GS-11 level usually functions in a manner that duplicates the duties and responsibilities already present in Category 1 or 4 scientist positions in the same unit. For example, if significant modifications and/or development of new methods are required, the SY will be closely involved because of the potential impact on the project and the validity of research results, hence, credit for independent judgment/development goes to the Category 1 or 4 position instead of the Category 3. Over time, however, it is possible for a Category 3 position to change due to impact-of-the-person-on-the-job and an accretion of duties to the GS-12 position may be considered. These situations are unique in nature and rarely occur. [NOTE: When a position which has been affected by the impact of an individual is vacated, it normally reverts back to its original classification.] Redescription of duties requests for the purpose of accreting the position to the next higher grade level above the established GS-11 FPL should be carefully scrutinized by the supervisor to determine whether the incumbent has demonstrated possession of actual knowledge, skills and abilities to perform those duties and responsibilities characteristic of a GS-12 position, such as:

- a highly specialized knowledge of the science involved
- considerable latitude for the exercise of independent judgment
- working knowledge of the methodology, procedures and techniques specific to that area or field
- ability to significantly impact the work of the project and/or other work programs
- serves as the technical expert in the field of expertise.

The agency's policy on Accretion of Duties should be considered in this review process (see <http://www.afm.ars.usda.gov/hrd/Classification/accretion.htm>). Any questions concerning the establishment or promotion of Category 3 positions should be directed to your servicing Human Resources Specialist, Human Resources Division.

cc:

W. Horner

HRD Branch Chiefs

M. Stetka