

Deputy Administrator, Administrative and Financial Management
Listening Post Teleconference
July 31, 2007

The following topics were discussed during the Q&A session of the Deputy Administrator's Listening Post held on July 31, 2007.

- 1) What the status is for the employee's entering their own time sheets into STARS?

HRD has been pilot testing the STAR Web direct entry system for the past several months. Last year, the pilot test revealed that this version of STAR Web was not ready for deployment due to many bugs and glitches. These issues have been corrected, so we are expanding the deployment of the system to Headquarters, Areas, and locations beginning in the. However, USDA is currently reviewing another system that may be purchased and implemented in the Spring of 2008, so as a result the Areas will be given the choice to deploy STAR Web immediately, or to defer deployment. We want to give Areas the flexibility of deciding whether to deploy the new version of STAR Web in the fall '07 and then a new system in the spring '08, or to just wait till next spring. (Note: the new system also has capability of employee entry of T&A info).

- 2) When will the CATS program be on the ARIS platform?

The migration of CATS to the Oracle platform with ARIS, SAMS, ARMPS, etc., is currently underway. Pilot/Beta testing is planned for spring of 2008 with full implementation scheduled for the beginning of FY 2009 (October/November 2008).

- 3) We find the IAS system/procedure difficult to use and causes extra work for everyone. If corrections are needed, they have to go through so many different people and when they get to the contracting officer, she doesn't like the way it is worded and makes us do it all again. Is this program going to be around for a while?

Unfortunately, IAS is here to stay. There are no plans to replace it. If anything, it is going to eventually be expanded to include even credit card buys.

- 4) We hear from other USDA agencies that their employees are allowed to enter their own travel vouchers in NFC. Will ARS be allowing this in the near future?

The agency uses travel coordinators rather than individual employees to enter travel vouchers, because this requires fewer people to be trained. Entering data into the NFC system is not intuitive, so fewer people with access, reduces the potential for errors. We may have additional opportunities over the next year with E-travel to consider expanding this to the individual employees, but we will have to see the system difficulty level and then consider the training requirements.

- 5) When we have vacancies, we would like to have someone transferred in on a set detail. We feel this is an excellent way to locate potential, quality candidates for our positions and at the same time, provides an opportunity for employees to experience working in other fields, advance from a lower grade, etc. before they make a major career decision. Salary lapse procedures do not allow the travel, per diem, etc. expenses of this detailed employee to offset reportable lapse, therefore we no longer consider set details. With escalating salaries, utilities, and operating costs, money for research is shrinking; it would be appreciated if these expenses would be allowed to offset reportable salary lapse and provide our agency employees career options.

At this time, a change to the Agency's salary lapse policy is not anticipated. The salary for a detailed employee is an allowable offset to lapse. The MU retains 20% of the salary lapse generated. The MU may elect to use this 20% to fund travel and per diem costs for the detailee.

- 6) We are still experiencing difficulties with receiving and tracking monies on soft fund accounts. Receipt of the checks is not timely, rollover of accounts is extremely slow and requires repeated requests for action, and what the ALLT tables show does not agree with what Area is showing. There has to be a better way!

Managing soft funds is very complicated with many factors to be considered. Over the last few years, we have made a concerted effort to tighten up our processes to ensure we manage and track our soft funds appropriately.

Carry over figures for reimbursable agreements are determined based on the final balance in the account (including all corresponding prior year accounts) in FFIS as of COB September 30. Documenting this amount in ARIS may be done by the Area Offices in October. However, official allocation of funds from BPMS may be delayed if there is a delay in receiving the appropriation of our "regular" funds from Congress as both our "regular" and our reimbursable funds are tied together in the same Treasury Symbol.

Carry over figures for trust fund agreements may not be accomplished until the fiscal year is "officially closed" with the production of USDA's Financial Statements in mid November. Therefore, allocations can not be issued until after this time, usually in December.

The receipt of a check for a trust fund does not mean you may begin spending. That check must be officially recorded in FFIS as a collection (after all, what if it bounces?), an allocation must be received from BPMS, and a financial plan authorizing spending must be issued by the Area Office. This process can take as much as 30-45 days.

The Incoming Soft Fund report can be downloaded from BRIO for reimbursable agreements. A report on trust funds, "Carryover Report", may be obtained from your Area Office or the FMD FFIS Operations Branch.

Finally, we are in the process of distributing for review a new draft manual on Reimbursable Agreements with other Federal Agencies. We hope to have it reviewed and finalized in the next few months.

Following the Q&A session, Jim Bradley provided the following information and updates:

National Administrative Officers Meeting

As you know, the National Administrative Officers meeting is scheduled for December 4 – 6, 2007, in beautiful Savannah, GA. If you have not already done so, please visit the Web site and follow its directions for participant registration.

Standard Position Description for Administrative Officers

Now that the new position descriptions (PD) have been established posted, the next step in the process is to complete and submit SF-52's to reassign all AO's from their current PD to the new PD at their current grade level. This action is due for completion by August 31, 2007. Once the SF-52's have been executed, the next step is to conduct the appropriate assessments. The assessments are:

1. Location assessment (supervisory responsibility, location size, complexity of agreements, number and type of facilities, etc.)
2. AO incumbent assessment (to determine if the incumbent demonstrates competencies required at the higher grade level)

Homeland Security Presidential Directive 12 (HSPD12)

- HSPD12 requires the development and issuance of a single government wide identification badge
- The Department of Agriculture is beginning to implement HSPD12 requirements
- The Director, Human Resources Division, AFM will be meeting with Departmental officials regarding the implementation process to ensure that it is properly scheduled, considerate of our available resources, and other logistical concerns
- ARS will be dealing with HSPD12 during FY 2008 – it will be a difficult transition
- The AO's help will be critical to helping others understand and adapt to the new requirements

Personally Identifiable Information (PII)

- DAAFM Requested feedback on activities that maintain PII and how it is protected
- There is a new requirement from the Assistant Secretary for Administration to review and secure PII data/information
- AO's can help by making sure PII is protected and informing HQ of its existence
- PII will very likely become an item of interest for the USDA, Office of Inspector General

Military Reservists Time and Attendance

Jim Bradley provided a synopsis of the Butterbaugh v. Department of Justice decision impacting the process for recording and charging leave for military duty. Following is a more detailed description of the issues.

History:

Butterbaugh surfaced officially in the decision on July 24, 2003, which resulted in the guidance of CPM 2004-19, October 13, 2004. At that time, claims could only go back 6 years (1997).

Pay and Leave Staff sent out an All Employee message on October 21, 2004 with the Butterbaugh decision information and instructions on how to make a claim for reimbursement for annual leave used because military leave was charged inappropriately for weekends and holidays.

New Decision:

The new decision essentially makes it the employee responsibility to produce the necessary documentation to substantiate a valid claim and allows claims to go back to 1990. It would be unusual for agencies to have kept documentation from 1997 (initial decision), or back to 1990 (the recent decision).

Q&A:

Q – How long do folks have to make a claim?

A - At present, there is no time limit on making a claim.

Q – How does one make a claim and what documentation is required?

A - To make a claim, the Pay and Leave Staff will need to be notified of the request and the employee must provide a copy of the military orders and certification of attendance or other documentation indicating that active military duty was performed on non-workdays.

Q – What about deceased employees?

A – Survivors of deceased employees can make a claim, as long as they have all the required documentation.

HRD Action:

This decision will be announced to all REE employees. HRD is prepared to process any claims which meet the documentation requirements.

FFIS and IAS Training

There was a discussion regarding the need for training in FFIS and IAS procedures. As a follow up, the following information is provided:

For IAS users entering requisitions, on line training is available through AgLearn. For procurement/contracting personnel, classroom training is conducted by the Department of Agriculture on an as needed basis.

Basic FFIS training is conducted by the Area Budget and Fiscal Officers for their respective Areas. FMD will be offering BRIO training at the end of August 2007 for those who are interested in learning this software.