Deputy Administrator
Listening Post Questions
October 31, 2007

Question(s): Perry Rainosek
Administrative Officer
Children's Nutrition Research Center

1. Governmental Standardizing of Quarterly Reports: I recently attended a Management Concepts Inc. course on Grants and cooperative agreements. The instructor notified the class that due to the grants simplification act, the awarded institutions (universities) would in the near future; submit standardized government quarterly financial report forms to the federal funding agency. These forms would be consistent within government. He said it would likely be the SF-269 forms and that many federal agencies are currently using their own versions of the financial reports. In my experience working with cooperators, they commonly use the SF-269's for other governmental agencies.

When I shared with him how ARS had used SF-269's in the past and that we switched to an ARS Financial Status Report in the last couple of years, he said it was likely we would be switching again.

Is this standardization true and is this something that ARS will be moving to in the future to abide by the Grants Simplification Act?

Answer: Sherri Carroll, EAD

ARS will not need to switch its financial status report currently in use. The MCI courses pertain to Federal Assistance Awards (grants) and therefore do not apply to the Non-assistance Cooperative Agreements or SCAs per the proposed regulation (7CFR550) that is currently being cleared through the federal Register. We eliminated use of the SF-269 as it is not detailed enough to document itemized expenditures for comparison with the agreement budget.

Any Grant or Assistance Type Cooperative Agreement awarded by ARS would need to comply with the Government-wide requirement as stated by the MCI instructor since these types of agreements are governed by the "Uniform Requirements for Grants and Cooperative Agreements ...." codified at 2 CFR part 215.

Question(s): Jan Overton AND Candace Wilson
Administrative Officer Administrative Officer
West Lafayette, Indiana Ft. Detrick, MD

Question(s):	**Jan Overton**	**AND**	**Candace Wilson**
	Administrative Officer		**Administrative Officer**
	West Lafayette, Indiana		**Ft. Detrick, MD**

2. eNEO (2 questions): What will be the LAO responsibility now that eNEO is available and will there be training on the eNEO Website for the administrative staff being questioned on it?

Answer: Karen Brownell, HRD

eNEO is designed to compliment the current New Employee Orientation (NEO) process. It is our hope that early access to the website will give new employees a glimpse of the information that will be provided to them on their first day. In addition, access to the EOD forms may speed up the process and allow more time for answering questions.

HRD has ensured that employees gain access to the new website by placing a statement about it in the offer letter mailed out to new employees, and a flyer is available for the HRD website to put in the new employee orientation package. AOs can help by including the flyer in their EOD packages and informing others responsible for conducting orientation to do the same. Each person involved in the EOD process is encouraged to visit the website to become familiar with its contents in order to inform employees of what is available to them. Additionally, AOs can encourage employees to visit the website to learn about other topics not covered on the first day under the "First Month" tab such as Mandatory Training, Safety and Health, and Performance to name a few. Lastly, if AOs have information beneficial to all REE Mission Area employees that we did not include, we want to hear about it. This will keep eNEO a valuable source of information for all. HRD has a designated individual (Kim McGregor) to monitor and maintain the website to ensure it is kept up to date, and suggestions can be posted to this person. The e-mail link for suggestions can be found on the eNEO website.

We hadn't thought training would be needed for the AO’s (like we did for eOPF, since that was a new system, and eNEO is just a website). But if the group seems to need training, we can schedule a webcast or teleconference. We could also publish a Bulletin, so they'd know we still want them to conduct new employee orientation - our eNEO was meant to supplement and support what they do for their employees, not replace it.

Question(s): Jan Overton
Administrative Officer
West Lafayette, Indiana

3. Why does the IT security training need to be so complicated? (Not from me)

Answer: Curtis Wilburn, AFM

We conferred with the ARS, OCIO Security Chief, Bob Fletcher for a response to this question. Bob indicates that he and others involved in agency level IT security are also concerned about the difficulty many people are experiencing with this year's training. It is important to note that the training is mandated by the Department, not ARS. ARS, OCIO will continue its efforts to get the Department to produce IT training that is measured and appropriate for personnel required to take the training.

Question(s): Candace Wilson
Administrative Officer
Ft. Detrick, MD

4. LAO Re-descriptions and where to get assistance in writing up narrative to address competencies?

ANSWER: Karen Brownell, HRD

DADs are responsible for implementing the new position description, competencies, and performance plans in their respective Areas. That should be your first stop for assistance. Much of the National AO Conference agenda will focus on the new description and what the expectations are, so that should help AO's with preparing their documentation also.

5. Future of location IT positions and whether they may be further looked at for outsourcing?

ANSWER: Anne Riordan, APD

The REE "IT functions" (mission area-wide) have been undergoing a micro-analysis feasibility review/cost benefit analysis (CBA) during the past several months. The first component reviewed specifically was the "REE IT Help Desk" commercial functions; the results of the CBA completed in September, was that the outcome favored continued Government performance of these functions. The next phase currently underway is planning for conducting the CBA on "All other REE IT commercial functions". The REE Competitive Sourcing Working Group is putting a project plan in place in order to accomplish this CBA, which will take until next summer to complete. Should the results of this CBA favor the private sector, then initial planning will take place to conduct an actual 'competition' between REE and the private sector (which can take anywhere from 12 to 18 months). A Communications Plan is currently under development to keep REE employees informed of the status of this current CBA project and will be posted to the AFM website under the "Competitive Sourcing" link.

6. LAO National Conference Update?

ANSWER: Larry Cullumber, APD

Dave Carter updated website – all information is there. The conference planning team continued its work in Savannah last week to put in place the final plans for this conference. All information related to registration, agenda, hotel reservations, etc. can be found on the AFM website under the "National AO Conference" link for the attendees.

7. Any further discussions of consolidation of CSREES and ARS?

Answer: Jim Bradley, AFM

No.

Question(s): John Watterson
Administrative Officer
Logan, UT

8. What is the status of the 2008 Budget?

Answer: Jim Bradley, AFM

The short answer is we really do not know. For USDA, the priority right now is approval of the Farm Bill. After the Farm Bill has been passed, we expect Congress to look at the budget. Having said that, we expect to be operating under a Continuing Resolution through early next calendar year.

9. Have the Congressional budget add on's been resolved?

Answer: Jim Bradley, AFM

We believe that they have. ARS was fortunate enough to have a number of its partners and stakeholders to express to members of Congress the importance of the projects supported by the add-ons, and it appears that they have had some success. We expect funding to be restored for these programs.

10. Status of the new Government credit cards (PCMS, Voyager, and Travel)?

Answer: Diane Eggert, FMD

TRAVEL: The current contract on the travel card expires on November 1, 2008. GSA has selected four vendors for their schedule for bank card services, JP Morgan Chase, GE Financial Services, Citibank, and US Bank. USDA is in the process of developing a request for proposal (RFP) that will be submitted to these four vendors and they will respond with their bids. The RFP has been developed by an interagency team. ARS has three representatives on the team; Linda Wilson, APD (purchase), Cheryl Bromback, APD (fleet) and Diane Eggert, FMD (travel).

We expect the RFP to be issued by early December 2007, with bids returned by January 2008. USDA will then evaluate the bids and a new vendor will be selected by March or April of 2008, if the contract process stays on schedule. USDA will then begin implementation activities with all travelers switched to the new card vendor on November 1, 2008. All REE employees with travel cards will be issued new cards prior to the implementation date to provide continuity of travel card services.

11. TSP has stopped using employees social security numbers, when will ARS (Identity Theft is a worry)?

Answer: Karen Brownell, HRD

All HRD internal systems have been modified to either delete the social security number or to show only the last 4 digits. HRD is working with OCIO on the e-Forms application, so that only the last 4 digits of social security number will show on the forms. We have no control over NFC systems; however, I know they are also working to remove social security numbers from their active databases. We will continue to need social security numbers for new employees, so we can get them into the personnel/payroll databases when they come on board; also, for NACI’s and other background investigations we will continue to need social security numbers. Financial systems (such as the Travel system) may still require SSNs, but NFC is working on that.

12. We have so many different passwords to log into the various government programs, which need to be reset at various times. Is there some way to consolidate these?

Answer: Curtis Wilburn, AFM

ARS, OCIO is making progress towards consolidation of passwords required for its internal systems maintained on the Oracle platform. However, the Departmental systems, those that are maintained by NFC, are a different matter and not under ARS control. We are advised that the Department’s plan is to have all Departmental systems accessed through e-Authentication, and we are not sure of where that effort stands at this moment.

13. Funding for a new ARS building on Utah State Univ. campus?

Answer: Pat Barry, FD

This will not happen anytime soon, due to severe budget constraints. It's up to Congress to appropriate funding.

Question(s): Jeanie Gwathney
Administrative Officer
Stuttgart, AR

14. Why does it take months to get a vacancy announcement developed?

Answer: Karen Brownell, HRD

There are many factors that go into the timing of vacancy announcements. When I review our tracking system reports, I often see that the specialist sent a draft vacancy announcement to the selecting official and it takes the selecting official several weeks to review it and return it. On other occasions, the timing of posting a vacancy announcement depends upon the schedule of a professional society meeting where the selecting official wants to take the vacancy announcement with him/her, or we are trying to time the announcement open and close dates with a paid ad placed in a scientific journal.

15. Why is the Supervisor responsible for developing the position description? Since they are not trained in the nuances of what makes an 11 a 11, a 12 a 12, a 13 a 13, etc., there is constant back and forth between the supervisor and HR to get the language right. It seems that HR needs to have a more active role in developing PD and vacancy announcements and needs to be much more efficient.

ANSWER – Karen Brownell

It is, in fact, the supervisor's responsibility to develop position descriptions. That's basic to being a supervisor. The supervisor knows what work is needed to be done, and is in the best position to write the description. Position classification standards are public information and are available on the OPM website – the AO can look at the standards and can assist the supervisor in writing the position factors, once the supervisor articulates what duties are to be performed, if the AO would like to provide that customer service to their RL. It is not the HR specialist's responsibility to write position descriptions. The HR specialist would have no way of knowing, for example, what Guidelines are available to the employee, what Personal Contacts are being made, and those sorts of details.

The RPES guidance on writing position descriptions and case write-ups is very clear, and writing those position descriptions should not be a problem for the scientist and the supervisor.

16. Employee Relations:

It seems the guidance that one receives is highly dependent upon the person that you speak with. If you talk with person A about an issue on one day, and person B on the same issue two weeks later (because person A is out of the office) you may get a very different answer. "Call Employee Relations" is at the top of the suggested Action Plan for dealing with employee problems. However, it is not always the practical choice.

Answer: Karen Brownell

HRD strives for consistency and since the location seems to be calling different specialists about the same case, it's possible that the location is providing different information during each call – and that would make sense because events can transpire in a two week period that would change the situation and could change the advice given. Without knowing what case(s) she is referring to, I can't respond further.

<u>Follow up Items for AFM resulting from the Round Table Discussion</u>

<u>Wellness Program</u>. There was some discussion on the rules for establishing Wellness Programs in ARS facilities using appropriated funds. We have looked into this issue and have confirmed that use of appropriated funds to establish Wellness Programs within Federal facilities is authorized under USDA policy. There are some limitations. Please refer to Department of Agriculture, Safety and Health Manual, Chapter 3 – Specialized Programs for more information and contact the Financial Management Division, AFM if more guidance is needed.

<u>AO Manual</u>. There was a good deal of discussion regarding the status of the AO Manual that has been developed as a collaborative project between the PWA and MWA AO's. We conferred with the DAD, PWA, and was advised that the manual is still undergoing review in the MWA. However, during the AFMC Conference in Davis, CA during the week of November 5, 2007, it was agreed to release the manual as a draft pending final issuance. AO's are advised that the AO manual is not intended to replace current Policy and Procedure but to serve as an informal how to guide. We are considering options for the best way to maintain the manual that include consideration of establishing an AO Board to monitor and manage updates.

<u>Listening Post Questions</u>. AFM will send out all questions received from AO's for the Listening Post to all participants in advance of the conference call.