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USDA  
FOREIGN  
AGRICULTURAL  
SERVICE

# GUIDE TO THE FOREIGN SERVICE OFFICER SELECTION PROCESS

Office of Foreign Service Operations

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## Section I

### The Foreign Service

The United States Foreign Agricultural Service (FAS) is one of the U.S. Government's four Foreign Affairs Agencies under the Foreign Service Act of 1980. Chartered in 1953, FAS is a small agency with a global mission and presence. FAS is responsible for a broad range of programs, activities and tasks designed to carry out the U.S. Department of Agriculture's statutory responsibility to promote U.S. agricultural interests overseas. The core mission of FAS is to facilitate trade and international cooperation, which are critical to the vitality of the U.S. agricultural sector. Staff includes about 850 people stationed in Washington and about 170 Foreign Agricultural Affairs Officers overseas. The Foreign Service officers represent the interests and needs of American agriculture at U.S. diplomatic missions abroad.

If you are interested in a Foreign Service career at FAS, there is plenty of opportunity, but entry is a competitive process that takes place only once each year.

### Is the Foreign Service right for you?

By joining the Foreign Service you will have opportunities to live in exotic places, to experience foreign cultures, to participate in making history, and to make friends all over the world. This lifestyle is not for everyone. Exotic places can expose you to exotic diseases and history in the making can be hazardous. A lot of posts are in smoggy, over-populated urban areas. You will be expected to spend two-thirds of your career overseas, moving every three or four years, and your family may not always be able to go with you. Take a State Department quiz to see if this is the right career choice for you at <http://careers.state.gov/officer/is-the-foreign-service-right-for-you/>.

### What does a Foreign Service Officer in the Foreign Agricultural Service Do?

The Foreign Agricultural Service (FAS) is unique within the U.S. government for its sole focus on global food and agricultural trade and food security issues. Foreign Service officers are posted across the globe, allowing FAS to address trade policy and market development issues as they arise. They are the front-line professionals representing the Department of Agriculture in 95 overseas field offices in U.S. diplomatic missions covering 162 countries. They can be sent anywhere in the world, at any time, to serve the diplomatic needs of the United States.

**Market Development** – FAS partners with 75 cooperator groups representing a cross-section of the U.S. food and agricultural industry. FAS' tool kit of market development programs helps U.S. exporters to develop and maintain markets for hundreds of products.

Market Access Program (MAP) – helps U.S. producers, exporters, private companies, and trade organizations finance overseas marketing and promotional activities such as trade shows, market research, consumer promotions, technical assistance, trade servicing, and education seminars.

Foreign Market Development Program (FMD) – aids in the creation, expansion, and maintenance of long-term export markets for U.S. agricultural products. Under the program, USDA partners with U.S. agricultural producers and processors, who are represented by nonprofit commodity or trade associations called “cooperators,” to promote U.S. commodities overseas.

GSM-102 Export Credit Guarantee Program and Facility Guarantee Program – encourages U.S. exporters to sell to buyers in countries where credit is necessary to maintain or increase U.S. sales, but where financing may not be available without CCC guarantees.

Technical Assistance for Specialty Crops Program (TASC) – provides funding to U.S. organizations for projects that address sanitary, phytosanitary, and technical barriers that prohibit or threaten the export of U.S. specialty crops.

Quality Samples Program (QSP) – helps U.S. agricultural trade organizations provide small samples of their products to potential importers in emerging markets overseas.

Emerging Markets Program (EMP) – provides funding for technical assistance activities to promote exports of U.S. agricultural commodities and products to emerging markets.

**Market Intelligence** – FAS provides the public with reports analyzing crop production, imports and exports, weather, and other factors affecting the global agricultural trade at no cost. These reports give stakeholders valuable intelligence and data.

**Trade Policy** – FAS pursues trade liberalization with many developed and developing countries. Having access to growing foreign agriculture markets is essential to U.S. farmers who produce far more than domestic buyers can consume.

Gain and Maintain Access – through monitoring and enforcing trade agreements.

Expand Access – through bilateral, regional, and multilateral trade negotiations that lower tariffs and reduce trade impediments.

**International Development** – FAS leads USDA’s efforts to help developing countries improve their agricultural systems and build their trade capacity.

Food Aid – provides U.S. agricultural commodities to millions of people in countries through direct donations and concessional programs.

Trade and Scientific Exchange Programs – provide technical assistance to developing countries to help them become better trading partners and achieve economic growth.

**Sanitary-Phytosanitary (SPS) and Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT) Issues** – Technical regulations and industry standards were once considered objective tools for facilitating production; however, they have become trade barriers. FAS works with international organizations and developing countries to establish SPS and TBT standards that are based on sound science.

## A Day in the Life of an Agricultural Attaché

“Every day, our office has to think about how 1.1 billion people are going to eat,” says Holly Higgins, Embassy New Delhi’s Minister Counselor for the Office of Agricultural Affairs, explaining the FAS interest in India in its most basic terms. Food security issues are central to the work of the agricultural attaché, and those issues cannot be separated from political and economic security and public health. Whether it is the trade relationship, food aid, or planning a long-term strategy for increasing understanding of U.S. scientific and regulatory approaches to food safety, it is all part of the day-to-day work of the agricultural attaché.

Higgins, like almost all agricultural attachés today, has regional responsibility, leading a team that covers India, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. The New Delhi office also helps support USDA efforts in the Maldives, Nepal and Bhutan. Higgins travels often but is not on the road as much as she was in a previous assignment to Sofia, Bulgaria, where she was the only agricultural officer covering eight Eastern European countries. Running a bigger operation in New Delhi she spends most of her time in the capital, while keeping in regular contact with staff throughout South Asia, including those in the new FAS office in Mumbai, which opened in 2010. Her team deals with “everything from food aid programs to press reports about food safety to reporting on the crop size and weather conditions,” Higgins says. Her offices also help facilitate scientific exchanges under various programs to promote common understanding. The U.S. trade portfolio with India is underperforming in comparison to other aspects of the bilateral relationship, so the FAS team is working to develop more markets and reduce barriers to the Indian market. Agricultural attachés must be fluent in a wide range of scientific and technical areas, including transgenic crops, nutritional labeling, domestic farm policies, rural development, and international banking. They must understand local culture and politics, as well as regional and cross border concerns. “You really have to drill down to understand what is going on and what might be driving policy or market fundamentals,” says Higgins.

Foreign Agricultural Service officers coordinate and leverage their work with many other U.S. government agencies. In collaboration with the U.S. Agency for International Development, agricultural officers administer U.S. food aid programs. While a close relationship has long been in place between FAS and the Foreign Commercial Service, in recent years agricultural officers have expanded cooperative work with the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, USDA’s Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, and U.S. Customs and Border Protection. FAS also works closely with the State Department’s Bureau of Oceans Environment, and Science and the Department of Commerce’s National Marine Fisheries Services on issues related to forestry (including climate change) and fisheries.

Higgins’ job, in part, is to make sure the United States is viewed as a safe and reliable supplier of food for India; so she and her colleagues support a growing two-way trade relationship in food and agricultural products. This involves negotiations with government regulatory bodies as well as working with the private sector to bring private-sector trade and investment groups together.

*About the Attaché: Higgins, started working for FAS in 1983 as a civil servant employee and entered the Foreign Service in 1990. Her previous postings include Sofia, Bulgaria; Milan, Italy; and Paris, France. She provided this interview to the Foreign Service Journal when she was posted in India in 2011. She is currently posted in Moscow, Russia. Prior to joining USDA, she was a regulatory economist with the Commodity Futures Trade Commission in Chicago. Before that, she worked on Capitol Hill for a member of Congress from Iowa, writing agricultural trade legislation. Holly grew up on a farm in Iowa and graduated from the University of Iowa with a degree in economics. She is married with three children.*

## Section II

### The Foreign Service Officer Selection Process

#### Requirements

- Possess at least one year of specialized experience equivalent to the GS-9 level in Federal service or completion of at least three full years of progressively higher level graduate education leading to a Ph.D. degree in marketing, economics, agricultural economics, agricultural business or other field of study directly related to this position from an accredited university.
- Be a U.S. citizen.
- Be available for a worldwide assignment and willing to relocate approximately every 3-4 years.
- Be able to pass a U.S. Government background check and obtain and maintain a top secret security clearance (costs covered by FAS).
- Be able to obtain and maintain medical clearance.

#### How to apply

##### 1. Complete the online application package.

To begin this process, create an account in USAJOBS (<https://my.usajobs.gov/>). Search Jobs by typing ***“Foreign Agricultural Affairs Officer”*** in ***“Washington DC.”*** View the job you have selected and then click ***“Apply Online.”*** Applicants must complete an online application for an announced vacancy by the closing date of the announcement. This job requires a USAJOBS resume to apply. The resume must contain the following information: 1) job information for which you are applying; 2) personal information; 3) education; 4) work experience; and 5) other qualifications. After submitting your resume, follow the prompts to complete the occupational questionnaire. **Applications are not screened for required documents. It is your responsibility to ensure that all required documents are received by the closing date of the announcement.** If you are unable to apply online, you may fax your application materials to the fax number stated on the announcement.

##### 2. The selection process

Applications will be screened to determine if the basic qualifications specified in the announcement have been met. Applications that pass through this first screening are rated and rank ordered, relative to the qualifications specified in the announcement. The highest ranking applicants are invited to participate in the Foreign Agricultural Service Assessment held in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area. Applicants will be notified by email if they have passed this first stage. FAS will not pay any travel costs.

The Assessment is divided into three parts: written, group and oral examinations. Those candidates who pass through the Assessment will be placed on a list called the Rank Order Register. The Register is valid

for a maximum of twenty-four months from the date certified by the Director General of the Office of Foreign Service Operations of FAS. Candidates who do not receive a conditional offer before the Rank Order Register expires may reapply. The number of candidates who are selected for a conditional offer depends on funding availability and needs of the service.

### **Written Examination:**

You will have three hours to complete four (4) exercises similar to the kind of work you would be expected to perform with relatively little guidance as an Agricultural Attaché or an Agricultural Trade Officer overseas. The exercises include a narrative statement, a briefing memo, feedback on a report, and a report summary.

The main objective of the written assessment is to assess whether you have the basic writing, editing, and reasoning skills to perform Foreign Agricultural Service work. The exercises should demonstrate that you can write in concise, well-organized, grammatically correct, effective, and persuasive English in a limited amount of time.

### **Group Exercise:**

Candidates are brought together in a group of four to six to constitute an Embassy task force charged with allocating resources to competing projects in their host country. Each candidate receives a package of common background materials, as well as a five-page candidate-specific project to read and absorb. At the end of that time, each candidate presents his or her project to the group. After the last presentation has been made, the group negotiates and debates pros and cons with the goal of reaching a consensus on which projects should be supported and at what level. Examiners observe the group to see how well individuals demonstrate the core skills and abilities, such as team work and negotiation that are essential in FAS Officers.

### **Oral Interview:**

In this portion of the oral assessment, interviewers will assess your fitness for the Foreign Service and the experience and skills you would bring to a job in the Foreign Agricultural Service. You might think of the oral interview as the formal job interview. Topics may include the U.S. farm legislation and the farm bill, agricultural trade, biotechnology, food security, climate change, food aid and food security.

### **Worldwide Availability:**

Worldwide availability is an essential requirement for appointment to the Foreign Service. Applicants must be available for worldwide assignment, including assignments at posts where health, living conditions, or medical support may be rudimentary, or in danger zones where family members are not allowed. Additionally, regardless of who administers the medical exam, the Department of State's Office of Medical Services determines whether or not a candidate is medically available for assignment to FAS posts worldwide. Certain medical conditions that require monitoring or follow-up care, or are prone to exacerbation in certain overseas environments, may result in a finding of non-worldwide availability and thus disqualify a candidate from eligibility. In cases where medical problems lead to a denial of medical clearance, the candidate may request a waiver of the worldwide availability

requirement. A decision to grant a waiver is made on a case-by-case basis and only if it is clearly in the best interests of the Foreign Service.

You will also be asked to reaffirm in writing that you accept the following two conditions of Foreign Service employment:

- First, support of U.S. Government policies and objectives, regardless of your personal views;
- Second, Worldwide Availability: Even though the Foreign Agricultural Service attempts to work with each employee's individual and family needs, all employees must be willing to serve anywhere that FAS determines to be necessary. This can mean in isolated, potentially unhealthy or dangerous environments, or where you might not have training in the local language. While you will have some input into the assignment process, everyone is expected to serve part of his or her career at hardship posts. FAS also has unaccompanied posts; if assigned to one, you would not be able to take family with you.

### **Medical Clearance**

Those entering the Foreign Service must be able to serve at any overseas post. Many facilities are remote, unhealthy, or have limited medical support. Therefore, each candidate must meet medical fitness standards which are, of necessity, often more rigorous than those of other professions. Candidates who are offered tentative job offers are provided with instructions for obtaining their medical clearances. Candidates can either schedule exams at the Department of State's Office of Medical Service or have them done by their own physicians. The candidate's medical insurance should be used to cover the cost of the exam. FAS will pay any remaining costs after the candidate's medical insurer has paid its customary fee. While candidates must be medically cleared for full overseas duty, the Department of State no longer considers the medical condition of family members for pre-employment purposes. However, the Department of State still requires medical clearances for family members before they can travel overseas to accompany an employee on assignment at U.S. Government expense. Family members who, for medical reasons, cannot accompany an employee on an overseas assignment may be eligible to receive a separate maintenance allowance.

### **Security Clearance**

A comprehensive security background investigation, conducted by the Office of Personnel Security in cooperation with other federal, state and local agencies, provides information necessary to determine a candidate's suitability for appointment to the Foreign Service and for a Top Secret security clearance. The process considers such factors as: failure to repay a U.S. Government-guaranteed loan or meet tax obligations; failure to register for the Selective Service; past problems with credit or bankruptcy; unsatisfactory employment records; a criminal record or other violations of the law; drug or alcohol abuse; and less than an honorable discharge from the armed forces. Extensive travel, education, residence and/or employment overseas may extend the time it takes to obtain a clearance. Candidates who cannot be granted security clearances are ineligible for appointment. Candidates who hold an active Top Secret security clearance from another U.S. federal agency and whose last background investigation is no more than seven years old can usually have their security clearances transferred. However, for the purposes of determining candidates' suitability, candidates whose background investigation is more than two years old still need to update their documentation to support an updated investigation.



### 3. The Skills Needed to be Successful in the Foreign Service

The Assessment is designed to test for skills, abilities and personal qualities which demonstrate whether the candidate possesses specific skills needed to perform successfully the job of a Foreign Agricultural Affairs Officer. The skills tested in the Assessment were determined after conducting a thorough job analysis. Specifically, these skills include:

- **Composure** – Staying calm, poised and effective in stressful or difficult situations is essential for Foreign Service officers who often need to think on their feet.
- **At Ease in Culturally Diverse Environments** – We value overseas experience as well as experience in the United States that has brought you in contact with people of different cultures, language and backgrounds.
- **Experience and Motivation** – It's important that applicants articulate the appropriate motivation for joining the Foreign Service.
- **Strong Analytical Skills** – Our stakeholders depend on FAS to provide market intelligence and coherent analysis that help U.S. agriculture compete in the global market place. Candidates should be able to identify, compile, analyze, and draw correct conclusions from pertinent data.
- **Writing and Speaking Skills** – Communication skills are central to carrying out our mission. Candidates need to be able to write and speak effectively and persuasively, and should be comfortable presenting information in a variety of settings and formats to a variety of audiences. FAS officers routinely work closely with locally employed staff and are called upon to polish writing from non-native English speakers.
- **Initiative and Leadership Skills** – FAS is the USDA's lead agency for international trade and exports. We have our sights set on identifying those who have the potential to lead as we carry out this heavy responsibility. The world is ever-changing, and so our agency must be able to adapt quickly, embrace change, and seize opportunities whenever and where ever they arise. We are looking for people who can come up with creative alternatives to resolving problems and show flexibility in response to unanticipated circumstances.
- **Judgment** – Employees must be able to discern what is appropriate, practical and realistic in a given situation.
- **Objectivity and Integrity** – Employees must be able to present issues frankly and fully, without letting personal bias prejudice actions.
- **Planning and Organizing Skills** – Resources are often limited and a systematic approach is needed to make sure we are achieving our objectives.
- **Teamwork Skills** – Employees work with many different groups within the Agency, across the U.S. Government, the private sector, and with people from different cultures around the world.

- **Foreign Language Skills** - While FAS provides language training to officers, having language skills and/or an interest/facility to learn languages is important for success in FAS.

#### 4. A few suggestions to help you prepare for the process.

- Check USAJobs or the FAS Website to see when the next test information session will be held.
- Review suggested websites:
  - Foreign Agricultural Service (<http://www.fas.usda.gov/>)
  - Foreign Agricultural Service Wikipedia page ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Foreign\\_Agricultural\\_Service](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Foreign_Agricultural_Service))
  - Current FAS World Production, Markets, and Trade Reports (<http://www.fas.usda.gov/current.asp>)
  - Global Agricultural Information Network (<http://gain.fas.usda.gov/>)
  - FAS Production, Supply and Distribution (PS&D) Online Database (<http://www.fas.usda.gov/data.asp>)
  - World Agricultural Supply and Demand Estimates (<http://www.usda.gov/oce/commodity/wasde>)
  - Weekly Weather and Crop Bulletin (<http://www.usda.gov/oce/weather/pubs/Weekly/Wwcb/index.htm>)
  - Crop Explorer (<http://www.pecad.fas.usda.gov/cropexplorer>)
  - Economic Research Service: International Markets & Trade (<http://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/international-markets-trade.aspx>)
  - Feed the Future (<http://www.feedthefuture.gov/article/foreign-agricultural-service-food-education-program-fuels-food-thought>)
  - World Trade Organization (<http://www.wto.org/>)
  - Office of the U.S. Trade Representative (<http://www.ustr.gov/>)
  - Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy (<http://www.iatp.org/>)
  - Congressional Research Service Reports (<http://www.nationalaglawcenter.org/crs/>)
- Review suggested reading list:
  - Current Affairs: U.S. News and World Report, The Economist, Time, Newsweek
  - Agriculture:
    - [Outlook for U.S. Agricultural Trade](#)
    - Berry, Wendell, *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture*
    - Diamond, Jared, *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies*
    - Any op-eds by the Secretary of Agriculture
    - Tannahill, Reay, *Food in History*, New York: Broadway Books, 1995
  - Foreign Service:
    - [Adventures in the Foreign Agricultural Service](#) by Bob Tetro
    - [Diplomacy as a Career](#)
    - Dorman, Shawn, *Inside a U.S. Embassy*, 3rd edition, Washington: Potomac Books Inc., 2011
    - Surviving the Fiscal Drought: The Foreign Agricultural and Commercial Services, Foreign Service Journal, May 2009
    - [AFSA Foreign Service Blogs](#)
    - Linderman, Patricia and Melissa Brayer-Hess, [Realities of Foreign Service Life](#), Bloomington, Indiana: iUniverse, 2007

- Kopp, Harry W. and Charles A. Gillespie, *Career Diplomacy: Life and Work in the US Foreign Service*, Second Edition, Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2011

## 2013 Timeline

<b>Activity</b>	<b>Dates</b>
Vacancy Announcement	February 4 - 15, 2013
Application Review	February 18 – March 15, 2013
Results letters and schedule information for written exam sent to applicants	March 15, 2013
Written Exam	April 10-16, 2013
Results letters and schedule information for group/oral interviews sent to applicants	April 23, 2013
Group/Oral Interviews	April 29-May 3, 2013
Results and pre-employment invitation letters sent to applicants	Beginning May 20, 2013