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**Executive Resources (ER)**  
**Merit Staffing and Recruitment Plan**  
**National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA)**  
(REVISED 9/27/2012)

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**I. INTRODUCTION**

1. In accordance with 5 *CFR* 317.501(c), Departmental DAO 202-250, and the Department of Commerce (DOC) *Executive Personnel Policy Manual*, the following Executive Resources (ER) Merit Staffing and Recruitment Plan documents the procedures used in the recruitment and selection for executive positions under the purview of NOAA's Operating Executive Resources Board (OERB).
2. This document will serve as NOAA's merit staffing and recruitment plan for all executive-level positions and may be revised only with OERB approval. Revisions will be provided to the Department by the Workforce Management Office (WFMO).
3. All candidate evaluations processed under this plan will be based on the established qualifications standard and will be made without discrimination for reason of age, sex, color, religion, national origin, marital status, sexual orientation, non-disqualifying physical handicap or lawful political affiliation.
4. This plan utilizes qualitative rating factors as a tool for assessing the overall qualifications of applicants. Candidates will be grouped according to the following categories:
  - a. **Not Qualified (NQ)**: A candidate who does not meet one or more of the Executive Core or Professional and Technical Qualification requirements.
  - b. **Qualified (Q)**: A candidate whose total background (e.g., work experience, training, education, outside activities) indicates a general knowledge/possession of the five (5) mandatory Executive Core Qualifications (ECQs) as well as the position's required Professional and Technical Qualifications (PTQs).
  - c. **Well Qualified (WQ)**: A candidate whose total background (e.g., work experience, training, education, outside activities) indicates a

substantive knowledge/possession of the five (5) mandatory Executive Core Qualifications (ECQs) as well as the position's required Professional and Technical Qualifications (PTQs).

d. **Best-Qualified (BQ):** A candidate with extensive experience whose overall technical and executive background for the position are distinctive.

5. A copy of this plan is available for review by anyone requesting information on the merit staffing process for NOAA executive level positions.

## **II. RESPONSIBILITIES**

1. The DOC Chief Financial Officer and Assistant Secretary for Administration (CFO/ASA) is the primary departmental official that is responsible for the oversight and management of all Department of Commerce executive positions; including those located in the Bureaus (e.g., NOAA).
2. The Under Secretary of Commerce for Oceans and Atmosphere (hereafter referred to as the Appointing Authority) retains authority to approve the selection of persons for all Senior Executive Service (SES), Scientific and Professional (ST) and Senior Level (SL) positions within NOAA.
3. The Deputy Under Secretary for Operations (DUS/O) (hereafter referred to as the Chair, OERB) is responsible/delegated authority for approval of the staffing/recruitment processes of NOAA executive level employees including, but not limited to: designating membership for selection panels to evaluate applicants found to be minimally qualified, approving Certification Statements, Qualification Standards, revisions to this document, reviewing the merit staffing process, endorsing screening panel and interview panel recommendations, certifying selection recommendations to the Appointing Authority on a *Selection Certificate* signed by the Line Office/Staff Office Nominating Official.
4. The Operating Executive Resources Board (OERB) is responsible for overseeing the SES merit staffing process and monitoring SES Executive, Candidate Development and Succession Planning Programs.
5. The Director for Workforce Management serves as the Executive Secretary for the Chair, OERB and liaisons with DOC, Line Offices/Staff Offices and the Chair, OERB in the management and staffing of NOAA executive positions.

6. The WFMO Executive Resources Program Manager (ERPM) is responsible for overseeing the preparation of documentation and obtaining approvals on recommended selections, maintaining complete documentation of SES merit recruitment actions, developing qualification standards, carrying out the functions as specified in this plan as well as preparing and referring the Appointing Authority's selections to the Department of Commerce (DOC). Along with the Director, WFMO the ERPM also serves as Executive Secretary, OERB.
7. The Human Resources Specialists (HRS) within the Executive Resources Program are responsible for the review of applications for minimum qualifications; preparation of panel documents and resulting selection certificates; obtaining approvals on recommended selections; maintaining complete documentation of SES merit recruitment actions; developing qualification standards; carrying out the functions as specified in this plan as well as preparing and referring the Appointing Authority's selections to DOC.
8. Line Office/Staff Office Nominating Officials are the supervisors of executive level positions who are responsible for executive workforce planning within their respective organizations and suggesting selections for executive vacancy announcements to the Chair, OERB. In addition, they are responsible for drafting position descriptions, making pay recommendations, and communicating with potential candidates with WFMO representatives during the approval process.

### **III. RECRUITMENT AND PRELIMINARY REVIEW**

The ERPM and/or HRS oversees the search for candidates. The following components should be utilized when recruiting and selecting for career SES positions in accordance with *5 CFR 317.501(b)(2)*.

1. Career SES vacancy announcements must be published through the Office of Personnel Management's (OPM) vacancy system, USAJOBS.gov. USAJOBS is the U.S. Government's official system/program for Federal jobs and employment information. USAJOBS delivers a service by which Federal agencies meet their legal obligation (5 USC 3327 and 5 USC 3330) providing public notice of Federal employment opportunities to Federal employees and U.S. citizens.
2. *5 CFR 317.501(b)(2)* requires that SES Career positions be advertised through the USAJOBS for a minimum of 14 calendar days. However, it is DOC's policy that all executive positions be posted for a minimum of 30calendar days; with exceptions to the 30-day requirement approved by DOC through Chair, OERB. Posting of the announcement is confirmed through USAJOBS with an OPM Control Number.

3. The area of consideration for all executive level positions must be stated as “All Qualified Persons.” OPM strongly encourages its announcements be open to “All Qualified Persons,” thereby, broadening the applicant pool to all groups of qualified individuals and allowing the potential for a more diverse group of candidates. In addition, consideration should be given to Departmental executive development initiatives as a source for potential applicants.
4. Line Offices/Staff Offices can meet goals of affirmative recruitment for minority and women candidates through means of paid advertisement(s) in appropriate publications, or by requesting assistance from appropriate organizations/professional societies (e.g., letters/notification of vacant positions, sharing the link to postings on USAJOBS.gov). The vacancy announcement should be circulated to outside stakeholders, relevant Federal agencies and minority organizations to seek a diverse applicant pool
5. In accordance with 5 *CFR Part 300, Subpart D*, the services of a nonprofit employment service or commercial recruitment firm may be used by Line Offices/Staff Offices to assist in providing qualified candidates who would otherwise not be available. In their search for applicants, the employment service or firm must utilize this Merit Staffing and Recruitment Plan as well as the approved qualifications standard for the position.
6. Complete applications, including required documents, must be received by 11:59 p.m. Eastern Time (ET) on the closing date of the announcement submitted through the USAJOBS vacancy announcement system.
7. Application packages that are not complete (e.g., those that do not address the ECQs and mandatory PTQs) cannot be considered.
8. The ERPM and/or HRS will conduct a preliminary qualifications assessment of each candidate in accordance with OPM’s qualifications standard and the *Rating and Evaluation Plan* of the position.
9. Only the applications of those who meet all mandatory qualification requirements will be presented to the screening panel. A *Preliminary Qualifications Form* (or electronic status database kept in USAJOBS) will be completed on each candidate and maintained in the appropriate merit staffing file in accordance with 5 *CFR 317.501(d)* which states an agency must retain records sufficient to allow reconstruction of the merit staffing process for a period of two years after an initial career appointment. If no appointment occurs, the records must be kept for two years from the closing date of the vacancy announcement.

10. Current and former members of the SES (who have completed the required one-year probationary period) and graduates of an OPM-approved Candidate Development Program, may be eligible for appointment either competitively or non-competitively. In either case, the member is automatically considered “HQ” in all five ECQs, however, they must meet the qualification standard and PTQ requirements. The ERPM and/or HRS assess the applicant's PTQs to determine if minimum qualifications are met. Non-competitive eligibles are expected to meet application requirements as described in the vacancy announcement.

#### **IV. SES SCREENING PANEL**

##### **A. Purpose**

The purpose of the SES Screening and Rating Panel is to recommend “Best Qualified” candidates to the Chair, OERB and the respective Line Office/Staff Office selection official for consideration for vacant SES positions.

##### **B. Composition**

1. Line Office/Staff Offices are responsible for nominating current Federal executives to the Chair, OERB and WFMO individuals to serve on a screening panel for their respective SES vacancies [including Senior Leader (SL) positions]. At the same time, alternate panel members should be nominated as well in case of scheduling conflicts.
2. The screening panel should be comprised of an odd number of members at the SES- level. A minimum of three (3) members are optimal.
2. To ensure diversity, women and minorities shall be considered for appointment to all screening panels to ensure diversity. Panel suggestions may not be approved by the Chair, OERB without evidence of diversity among panel members.
3. A majority of the screening panel must be career employees in the SES. It is NOAA’s practice to only use current Federal executives for rating panels. Non-Federal executives may only serve as advisors to a rating panel on an as needed basis. STs and SLs may not participate as panel members for SES rating panels.
4. Members of the military and NOAA Corps Officers may be appointed to the screening panel as long as they are at a comparable rank to the executive level position.

5. Non-career senior executives may participate, but it is not required. If used, non-career SES panel members may not make up the majority of panel participants.
6. The Chair, OERB must approve the appointment of all panel members prior to the panel convening.

C. Review Process

1. Line Offices/Staff Offices will schedule review panels and secure conference rooms and/or teleconferencing information for screening panels.
2. Each panel member will be provided copies of all qualified candidates' application materials as soon as possible prior to the panel convening. Application materials for each applicant should include, but are not limited to:
  - a. Resume, Optional Application for Federal Employment form (OF-612), or Application for Federal Employment (SF-171); and,
  - b. Executive Core Qualifications (ECQ) and Professional/Technical Qualifications (PTQ) narratives.
3. Panel members may participate in the review process remotely through teleconferencing if necessary
4. Through consensus, the panel must determine the quality level (i.e., not qualified, qualified, well qualified, or best qualified) of each applicant, based on comparison of each applicant's overall experience to the qualifications requirements as described in the rating and evaluation plan. All forms and documentation will be maintained in accordance with 5 *CFR 317.501(d)*.
  - a. Panel members will record the rating of each applicant on *Evaluation Summary Forms*. Panel members may only consider information submitted by the applicant and are required to sign and date the form. If held remotely, panel members may scan or fax in signed rating sheets.
  - b. If a candidate is eligible for non-competitive appointment (e.g., currently a member of the SES or CDP graduate), panel members should determine the PTQ rating as they are automatically

considered HQ in the ECQs. Candidates eligible for non-competitive appointment are still required to meet the mandatory PTQs.

- c. Panel members must provide succinct, clearly written comments - either beside each of the ECQs and PTQs, or in the overall summary comments section on the *Individual Summary Sheets* (used by panel members to evaluate applicants). Panel members will assign a final overall rating, as designated in the *Rating and Evaluation Plan*, and sign/date each evaluation sheet in ink.
- d. Final ratings (including candidates eligible for non-competitive appointment) are recorded by the ERPM and/or HRS and signed by each panel members on the *Final Ratings Form*.
- e. Panel members must certify the results of their deliberations to the Chair, OERB. They will also endorse the final summary rating for each eligible candidate and the list of “Best Qualified” applicants to be referred to the selecting official. A “Best Qualified” applicant is one whose overall technical and executive experience for the position warrants further consideration of their application by management.
- f. The Chair, OERB will review the ratings assigned, list of best qualified applicants, and certify that the deliberations of the rating panel have been evaluated.

## V. ST/SL Recruitment and Screening Panel

Unlike the SES, recruitment and selection for Scientific and Professional (ST) positions within NOAA must be approved and vetted by the Council of NOAA Fellows (CNF) whose members are appointed by the Under Secretary of Commerce for Oceans and Atmosphere. This process ensures the scientific integrity that is critical to NOAA in meeting strategic scientific goals. Senior Leader (SL) positions are not normally vetted through the CNF as the preponderance of their duties are not scientific or research focus.

1. Category rating procedures as described in section I, 4 will be used for ST and SL recruitment as well.
2. In accordance with 5 C.F.R. 319.401, SL positions must be advertised in the same manner as SES positions. Additionally, **veterans’ preference procedures must be applied in the recruitment process for SL positions as prescribed by OPM**. Vacancy announcements for SL

positions must remain open for a minimum of 14 calendar days (the closing date may not be a non-workday). DOC's policy is that all executive positions are announced for a minimum of 30 calendar days.

3. There are two paths for recruiting ST positions: (1) direct hire (as authorized by 5 C.F.R. 319.402, or (2) through public announcement (e.g., USAJOBS or use of a recruitment firm paid by the respective Line Office/Staff Office). However, the CNF believes that a judicious combination of BOTH options would be in the best interest of NOAA and the scientific community.
  - a. ST Promotions from Within NOAA: ST positions are to be filled with individuals that possess the competencies and skills equivalent to the GS-15 or pay band V level. ST positions should represent the highest level of scientific expertise in the NOAA workforce. Therefore, we should maintain a practice of recommending the best scientists and science advisors as candidates for any ST openings. Such promotions will help us to recruit scientists at all levels by showing the kind of scientific career progression possible within NOAA and help the agency retain its best and brightest by demonstrating that we reward our very able and deserving internal candidates with our highest professional positions in science.
  - b. Outside Recruitment for ST Positions: A highly competitive outside recruitment will help NOAA attract top scientific expertise from the external community, highlight the stature of NOAA as a great science organization to work in, and enable NOAA to jump-start a scientific discipline that is either not currently in house or is not sufficiently strong.
4. Regardless of the hiring path for an ST vacancy, the candidate must meet the qualifications criteria for the position as outlined in the *Council of NOAA Fellows Committee Report* and an open, transparent process must be used.
  - a. The application process typically will be similar to the current process for SES positions where vacancies are advertised and applications sought, and will conform to the requirements of OPM, DOC and the Workforce Management Office.



- b. The position description of the ST or SL position will be developed by the Line Office/Staff Office responsible for the position using the Expectations and Qualifications described in the *Council of NOAA Fellows Committee Report*.
- The Line Office may also include additional qualifications that are required for that organization but they must be consistent with the expectations and qualifications noted for ST and SL positions.
  - For ST positions, it is recommended that PTQs be established that require candidates to justify their respective background (i.e., education and/or experience) by listing publications, presentations and/or participation in national/international technical organizations.
- c. The Chair, CNF or his/her designee(s) may review each announcement request prior to publication.
- d. At least three NOAA Fellows, nominated by the Chair, CNF, should comprise the rating panel, examine all the complete applications for a given ST or SL vacancy, and recommend qualified candidates to the Selection/Interview panel. If no suitable subject area expert exists within the CNF, the CNF Chair may recommend one external member from outside NOAA (but must be current Federal employee in a comparable position) to serve on the rating panel, with the other two members being from the CNF. This integrates the CNF into existing processes and does not add additional steps into the process.
- e. The CNF Chair will nominate one NOAA Fellow to serve on the interview panel for the selection of an ST or SL.
- f. Working with the Workforce Management Office, the respective Line Office/Staff Office, will establish an Interview/Selection Panel that would include one member from the CNF.
- g. The CNF Screening Panel will report its findings to Chair, OERB and/or Chief Scientist if they desire.

- h. The Interview/Selection Panel will interview “Best Qualified” candidates and provide recommendations for hiring. A unanimous decision of the Interview/Selection committee will be best, but a majority is essential. The top candidates will be interviewed even if there are fewer than three candidates.
- i. Like the SES, final approval of ST or SL selection resides with the Appointing Authority after concurrence from the Chair, OERB, in consultation when appropriate with the NOAA Chief Scientist, and consistent with the requirements of the Agency and the Department.

**VI. NOMINATING OFFICIAL REVIEW/RECOMMENDATION**

- A. The ERPM and/or HRS will prepare a transmittal memorandum to the appropriate Line Office/Staff Office head responsible for making a selection with recommendation through the Chair, OERB. The Chair, OERB either concurs with list of candidates or requests additional information on the candidates. The following documentation will accompany this memorandum:
  - 1. Copies of the "best qualified" applications as determined by the SES screening panel;
  - 2. A SES *Selection Certificate*; and
  - 3. Rating Sheet of all “Qualified” candidates.
- B. The nominating official(s), may choose to conduct interviews after the Chairperson, OERB has reviewed the panel recommendations. Interviews are strongly encouraged, but not required as part of the selection process. If, however, Line Offices/Staff Offices decide to conduct interviews, the following provisions must apply.
  - 1. The Nominating Official has fifteen (15) business days from the issuance of the certificate of eligible to complete interviews, sign the selection certificate and return to WFMO. Extensions may be granted upon request to WFMO.
  - 2. Interviews may be conducted in person or by telephone. If performed, it is recommended that all candidates on the selection certificate be interviewed. The Nominating Official must decide who will be interviewed from the panel’s list.
  - 3. Based on the rating panel recommendations and the interview process, the

Nominating Official will provide to the Chair, OERB through the Director, Workforce Management Office a recommendation for selection. The nominating official will provide to the ERPM the following information:

- a. Signed and dated copy of the *Selection Certificate* indicating a selection or non-selection; and
- b. A selection justification memorandum addressed to the Director, Workforce Management Office.

**VII. CHAIRPERSON, OPERATING EXECUTIVE RESOURCES BOARD REVIEW (OERB)**

- A. Following the recommendation for selection by the Nominating Official, the ERPM and/or HRS will forward to the Chairperson, OERB for review and certification the following documentation:
  1. Copies of the application materials for the selected candidate;
  2. *Selection Certificate*; and,
  3. The nominating official's recommendation and selection justification.
- B. The Chairperson, OERB, may prepare additional written recommendations.
- C. The Chair, OERB will certify, via a *Certification Statement*, that the candidate selected meets those managerial and technical qualification requirements of the position and that merit staffing procedures were followed.
- D. Following the review of the Chairperson, OERB, the *Selection Certificate* (and other supporting documentation) is forwarded to the Appointing Authority for review and approval.

**VIII. APPOINTING AUTHORITY, NOAA**

- A. The Appointing Authority, NOAA, may conduct additional interviews and/or additional reference checks.
- B. The Appointing Authority will certify that the candidate selected meets the mandatory qualification requirements of the position.
- C. In accordance with DOC policy, the ERPM and/or HRS will prepare the selectee's case for submission to the Department and/or OPM's Qualifications Review Board.

## **IX. Definition of Terms**

**Appointing Authority:** Responsible for certifying that SES career candidates, and ST and SL candidates, meet the mandatory executive and professional qualifications of a current or newly established SES position by signing the Selection Certificate. The Appointing Authority for NOAA is the Under Secretary of Commerce for Oceans and Atmosphere/NOAA Administrator.

**Candidate Development Program (CDP) Graduate:** A candidate who has completed the requirements of an OPM approved CDP, received the endorsement of the Chair, OERB and has been certified by OPM's Qualifications Review Board (QRB).

**Evaluation Summary Form:** This form is used by the Panel Members to assign ratings for each of the ECQs, and PTQs. A separate form is completed for each application and the rater will provide individual ratings and an overall rating, as well as individual/overall comments. The rater will also sign and date the form in ink. *Evaluation Summary Forms* are maintained by HRMO for two years.

**Executive Core Qualifications (ECQs):** Five (5) mandatory executive qualifications/key characteristics established by OPM for effective, executive level management. Candidates for career SES positions are required to meet all five (5) ECQs prior to appointment.

**Executive Resources Program Manager (ERPM):** Responsible for overseeing the preparation of documentation and obtaining approvals on recommended selections, maintaining complete documentation of SES merit recruitment actions, developing qualification standards, carrying out the functions as specified in this plan as well as preparing and referring the Appointing Authority's selections to DOC. The ERPM also serves as Executive Secretary, OERB, providing information and policy recommendations on matters pertaining to the SES.

**Final Ratings Form:** This form is completed after the screening panel has determined the final ratings (through consensus). The form includes a listing of all qualified candidates and the best –Qualified candidates who warrant further consideration by management.

**Human Resources Specialist (HRS):** Responsible for the review of applications for minimum qualifications; preparation of panel documents and resulting selection certificates; facilitation of panel meetings; obtaining approvals on recommended selections; maintaining complete documentation of SES merit recruitment actions; developing qualification standards; carrying out the functions as specified in this plan as well as preparing and referring the Appointing Authority's selections to DOC.

**Nominating Official:** The line/staff office head responsible for making a selection recommendation to the Chairperson, OERB and the Appointing Authority, NOAA (e.g., Assistant Administrators, Director, Systems Acquisition Office, General Counsel).

**Non-Competitive Eligible:** A candidate who has previously served in the SES (and has completed the required one-year SES probationary period), a current member of the SES or an OPM certified graduate of a Candidate Development Program, whose rating is based upon evaluation of the Professional/Technical Qualifications.

**Operating Executive Resources Board (OERB):** Oversees the merit staffing process for NOAA and the development of candidates for SES positions. The Chairperson and permanent members are appointed by the Appointing Authority.

**Preliminary Qualifications Form:** Used by the ERPM and/or HRS to conduct a preliminary assessment of a candidate's application. The rating criteria are based on the approved qualifications standard submitted to the Chairperson, OERB. *Preliminary Qualifications Forms* are maintained in HRMO for two years.

**Professional and Technical Qualifications (PTOs):** Mandatory qualification requirements based on the duties of the position and qualifications standard.

**Qualifications Review Board (ORB):** OPM convenes ORBs every Tuesday to certify that a candidate meets the mandatory ECQs. This review occurs before a candidate's initial career appointment. More than one-half of the members of a ORB are SES career appointees.

**Rating and Evaluation Plan:** Used by the SES screening panel for assessing the qualifications of applicants. The plan is developed based on the approved qualifications standard for the position and specifies the benchmark criteria to determine the overall final ratings of not qualified, qualified or best qualified for each applicant.

**Scientific and Professional (ST):** Established by 5 U.S.C. 3014. These positions do not meet the executive criteria characteristics of the SES; however, they do involve a significant amount of fundamental research and development responsibilities and are classified above the GS-15/ZP-V level. STs are typically responsible for formulating research plans and hypotheses; carrying out project plans; interpreting findings and assessing their organizational and professional applicability; and/or locating and exploring the most promising areas of research in relation to agency program needs and the state of the science or discipline.

**Rating Panel:** The panel is comprised of at least three (3) members at the SES level. The panel is responsible for reviewing and rating completed applications forwarded by the ERPM and/or HRS. Rating Panel members must be approved by the Chair, OERB prior to convening.

**SES Selection Certificate:** Includes the names of all "best qualified" candidates (competitive and non-competitive) for a particular career SES position. The SES Selection Certificate is prepared by the ERPM and/or HRS based on the ratings recommended by the SES screening panel and Chair of the OERB. It is signed by the Nominating Official, Chair, OERB and the Appointing Authority, NOAA.

**Senior Leader (SL):** Established by 5 U.S.C. 5108. These positions do not meet the executive criteria characteristics of the SES nor do they involve the fundamental research and development responsibilities that are characteristic of the ST; however, they are classified above the GS-15/ZP-V level. Their work is accomplished through combined advisory and administrative direction; leading others less than 25% of the time.

## **X. REFERENCES**

1. **Code of Federal Regulations, Title 5, Administrative Personnel**, January 1, 2012.

**5 CFR Part 300, Subpart D:** Regulations that pertain to the use of a nonprofit employment service or commercial recruiting firm for assisting in searching for best qualified candidates.

**5 CFR 317.501:** Recruitment and selection regulations for initial SES career appointments.

**5 CFR 317.501(b)(2):** Regulations on OPM's SES vacancy announcement system/Federal Job Opportunities Board (FJOB) and the minimum period of time a SES vacancy announcement must be open. Regulations state that a vacancy must be open for at least 14 calendar days, however, DOC requires a minimum of 30 calendar days.

**5 CFR 317.501(c):** Regulations on the merit staffing requirements.

**5 CFR 317.501(d):** Merit staffing regulations on length of time to retain records to allow reconstruction of merit staffing process. Two (2) years after initial career appointment and if no appointment results, the records are kept for two years after the closing date of the vacancy.

2. **Executive Personnel Policy Manual**, Department of Commerce, Office of Human Resources Management, January 2011.

3. **Senior Executive Service Desk Guide, Working Draft**, Office of Personnel Management, September 2011.