



United States
Department of
Agriculture

Natural
Resources
Conservation
Service

June, 2007

New Employee Guide

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Welcome to the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).....	1
Overview of Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).....	2
Dress Code	4
Employee Assistance Program (EAP).....	16
Ethics and Political Activities.....	13
Flexible Spending Accounts.....	7
Government Owned Vehicles (GOV).....	11
Government Travel Credit Card.....	11
Health Insurance.....	7
Hospital Insurance Tax (HIT).....	8
Job Protections.....	12
Leave.....	6
Life Insurance.....	8
Long Term Care Insurance (LTC).....	8
Mentoring.....	16
Miscellaneous Sources of Compensation.....	5
Office Mail.....	4
Per Diem.....	11
Performance Standards.....	15
Personal Records.....	3
Policies and Regulations.....	3
Position Classification.....	13
Position Descriptions.....	15
Promotions and Transfers.....	14
Retirement.....	8
Survivor Benefits.....	9
Telephone Tips.....	4
Thrift Savings Plan.....	9
Time and Attendance (T&A) Records.....	5
Travel.....	11
Types of Appointments.....	10
Useful Websites.....	22
Work Schedules.....	5
Your Pay.....	4
Common NRCS Acronyms.....	17

Welcome to the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)

Regardless of whether you've previously worked for the government, you're going to observe something soon if you haven't already: this is not your father's or mother's Federal government. Significant changes have occurred in recent years that may require you to reconsider what you thought you knew about the government as an employer.

Increased flexibility has been the hallmark of the changes the government has gone through—and is continuing to go through. You will see the effect on the job. You also will see the effect in your pay and benefits package as a Federal employee.

The days of highly centralized control from the Government's personnel agency, the Office of Personnel Management is over (<http://www.opm.gov/>). It's replaced with increased authority for individual agencies and even individual managers over issues of importance to employees. The government, in many ways, is way ahead of the curve as an employer.

The retirement system similarly has been put through an overhaul to make it more accommodating of employees' career plans, including notably the addition of a tax-favored savings program that can be highly valuable to employees. In those ways, the government has worked to keep up with changes in the private sector workplace.

The government is a leader in providing its employees with a choice in health and life insurance benefits and complies with policies ranging from parental leave to equal employment opportunity that in the private sector apply only to relatively large companies. It is a leader in the workplace. And it provides a range of protections to ensure that employment related decisions including promotions are made on the basis of merit.

One thing that hasn't changed, however, is that serving the public through government employment is a noble career and one that strengthens our nation. So this is not only a welcome, it is also a thank you.

Overview of Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)

The NRCS came out of troubled times – the Dust Bowl days of the 1930s. Dust storms ravaged the Nation’s farmland, stripping away millions of tons of topsoil. Huge dust clouds carried the soil hundreds of miles, all the way to the Atlantic Ocean. Since that time, NRCS has kept a commitment to protecting and conserving soil and other natural resources on America’s private lands.

The NRCS is known worldwide for its accomplishments and innovations in conservation. The people of NRCS are recognized for their talent, dedication, and ingenuity in making the agency’s programs work. Participation in NRCS’ programs is voluntary - the people we serve want us with them as they take necessary steps to reduce erosion, protect wildlife, improve water quality, and promote good land use, and other measures to preserve the Nation’s natural resources for future generations.

At NRCS, we take pride in our partnerships. We work with local land conservation departments to let people know how important it is to conserve natural resources...and, together, we work with them on how to do it.

Conservation Careers – NRCS offers a variety of career opportunities for a variety of skill and educational levels as well as for those who are still in college. For job information please see <http://usajobs.opm.gov>. Here’s an overview of some of those opportunities.

Soil Conservationist – Soil Conservationists offer conservation planning and technical help to everyone from family farmers to local government officials. Suggestions are given to help with ways to conserve the soil, improve water quality, manage nutrients, and protect and improve wildlife habitat.

Soil Conservation Technician – Technicians assist soil conservationists. Their most important job is working on the land with farmers, land owners, and others. Soil Conservation Technicians show them how to install conservation practices and oversee the quality of those practices. Engineering surveys and design standard conservation practices such as waterways, terraces, and contour strip cropping systems are also part of the job.

Soil Scientist – Soil Scientists map and classify soil, identify problems such as wetness and erosion, and use aerial photographs to map soils and write soil descriptions and prepare other information about soils. They also sample soil and evaluate soil quality, work with watershed information and water quality reports, and record changes in land use patterns.

Grazing Land Specialist – Grazing Specialists plan grazing systems that improve the quality of forage and other grazing land functions. Suggestions are given to help in ways to use grazing animals as tools to improve and sustain natural resources.

Biologist – Biologists spend most of their time in the field working with private land owners, other agencies, and units of government. They provide technical support on wetland and fish and wildlife habitat development or restoration.

Engineer – NRCS employs a large number of engineers who have specialized skills in erosion control, water management, structural design, construction, hydraulics, soil mechanics, and environmental projection, along with general engineering skills. Job assignments may include establishing stream-bank and erosion control measures; designing waste management systems and concrete and earthen dams; and applying bioengineering principles to solve a host of natural resource problems. Engineers also become involved in helping communities recover from natural disasters.

Civil Engineering Technician – Civil Engineer Technicians are involved in planning, design, and construction work. They assist engineers with surveying the land, plotting notes, and laying out construction measures. They gather data, make computations, and prepare maps and cross sections of profiles. They may also serve as a construction inspector on a wide variety of projects.

Other Careers in NRCS – Agronomy, Business Administration, Cartography, Computer and Information Technology, Contracting, Forestry, Human Resources, Hydrology, Plant Sciences, Watershed Management, Wetland Science, and Wildlife Biology.

Policies and Regulations

It will be beneficial for you to read and understand the regulations and policies that affect your work and conduct as an employee. NRCS publishes regulations, policies, and procedures to supplement those provided by USDA. Information pertinent to employees is contained in directives, manuals, circulars, and instructions. The General Manual website is <http://policy.nrcs.usda.gov/scripts/lpsjis.dll/GM/GM.htm>. The Human Resources staff can assist you with this information.

It is your responsibility to help keep the cost of Government operations to a necessary minimum. You should be alert of any opportunity to improve jobs in your immediate office, other parts of the Agency, or other governmental agencies.

Personal Records

As an employee, you should maintain important personal documents and records. You are responsible for ensuring that your records are current and accurate. Some of your important records include:

- ◆ Time and Attendance Reports
- ◆ Personnel Actions
- ◆ Performance Standards and Appraisals
- ◆ Position Descriptions
- ◆ Training Documentation
- ◆ Awards Documentation

Some of these records are filed in your Official Personnel Folder (OPF), which is kept in the Human Resources Office. You are entitled to have access to this information. You are also responsible for notifying Human Resources of any change in your name, home address, and family status.

You have access to your own Employee Personal Page through the National Finance Center (NFC). The employee personal page allows you to view your payroll, leave, travel, life insurance, health insurance, savings bonds, and other personal information. You should access the NFC home page on the Internet (www.nfc.usda.gov) to obtain a personal identification number (PIN) to view employee data. Follow the instructions provided to request a PIN.

You will receive a “Statement of Earnings and Leave” for each pay period that you are employed. It is important to verify that the statement accurately reflects required and, where selected, optional deductions. Report any errors immediately to your Human Resources Office.

My.NRCS

The my.NRCS Intranet site <http://my.nrcs.usda.gov> was developed in 2003 to improve communications with NRCS employees. This site links to all other NRCS websites; updates on agency programs and events; and vacancy announcements are examples of information found on the my.NRCS site. Employees are encouraged to use this site as their home page.

EMPOWHR

EMPowHR is an automated system which allows for processing personnel actions, establishing performance standards and evaluating performance, and allows employees access to update personal information. It is integrated with WebTCAS for timekeeping purposes.

As an employee you will be provided an operator ID and PIN number. This will allow you to get into the system to view your personal data. The website address is <https://icams.usda.gov/index.html>

Dress Code

While NRCS does not have a specific dress code you must remember that personal appearance is a steppingstone for achieving success.

You should dress appropriately for each occasion. Your office or work setting and environment will influence your dress style. Always be neat and clean in whatever you choose to wear. Clothing should be clean and free of rips, tears, or holes.

You broadcast a message in what you wear. Remember that your dress is a reflection of you and the Agency. Dress professionally to match the occasion. Shorts, short skirts, crop tops, t-shirts with advertising, etc. are not appropriate dress.

Telephone Tips

We must make every effort to maintain good customer service. Listed below are several tips for a successful telephone conversation:

- Make a series of calls during a given time period, if possible. It is easier and more time efficient.
- Caring is one of the nicest traits to develop.
- Learn to ignore people's indifferences. People will provoke you only if you let them.
- Turn negative stress into a positive force by practicing self-control and maintaining high self-esteem.
- Use self-discipline to maintain an ongoing dialogue; even in difficult situations.
- At some point in your conversation, give everyone you talk to positive feedback.
- Make a brief apology if there is a problem, and do it with a smile. Callers can always hear it.
- Tune out distractions and concentrate on what is being said in the conversation.
- Let the other person talk without interrupting him/her.
- Improve listening by taking accurate notes.
- Ask questions so that you keep in tune with what the caller is thinking; as well as saying.
- Speak the caller's language so everyone can relax.
- Always remember you are a representative of the Agency.

Office Mail

Most business letters that are mailed use the official postage-and fees-paid privilege. However, they must conform to postal regulations and to Agency mailing procedures. Do not use Government letterhead and postage-paid privileges for personal business. Unless it is an emergency, do not have personal mail or packages sent to your office. It is a violation of Federal laws and regulations to use postage-paid Government envelopes to file job applications.

Your Pay

The general schedule (GS) salary system for federal employees is what is generally referred to as the "civil service" pay system.

The GS system is divided into 15 grades, each of which has 10 steps. Entry-level hiring into a grade normally is done at step 1. The grade level of an initial hire depends largely on the occupation, as does the career progression up through the grades.

Pay is locality based. There are about 30 metropolitan locality pay areas and a catch all "rest of the U.S." (RUS) locality for everywhere else within the contiguous 48 states. Raises are set by local labor market conditions, subject to the availability of funds appropriated by Congress.

NRCS federal employees are paid biweekly. Your annual pay rates are based on 26 pay periods of 80 hours each, a total of 2,087 hours for the year. You will receive a salary check (direct deposited) every two weeks on designated paydays. Salary schedules are found at http://www.opm.gov/Employment_and_Benefits/index.asp

Time and Attendance (T&A) Records

An official Time and Attendance (T&A) record for each employee is maintained by your local timekeeper.

At the end of each biweekly pay period, you will electronically update and transmit your T&A to a Timekeeper who will, in turn, submit it to the National Finance Center (NFC). This T&A will show your time worked, holiday pay, previous leave balance, leave earned, leave taken, and current balance. You should review all entries for accuracy. Currently, NRCS uses the WebTCAS system to process T&As.

The WebTCAS site is <http://webtcas.nrcs.usda.gov/webtcas/index.jsp>

Work Schedules

The standard tour of duty for a full-time employee is a 40-hour basic workweek consisting of 5 days of 8 hours each day, Monday through Friday. Core hours are hours designated during which all employees must be at work or in leave status. The core hours in NRCS are 9:00 a.m. - 3:00 p.m.

NRCS participates in a modified Maxiflex and Compressed Work Schedule. For more information on the alternate work schedules, please refer to the General Manual. Check with your supervisor to see if these alternate work schedules apply to your office.

Miscellaneous Sources of Compensation

Awards

NRCS has various award systems for their employees as recognition for ongoing good performance, suggestions, and inventions or for special contributions to the agency's mission.

Special Act or Service Awards are given for performance that exceeds job requirements as a one-time occurrence.

Injury Compensation

The Federal Employees Compensation Act (FECA), administered for all by the Labor Department, provides workers' compensation benefits to federal employees who sustain job-related injuries or illnesses. You should report any on-the-job injury to your supervisor as soon as possible.

Overtime

The federal government complies with the Fair Labor Standards Act, which provides for minimum standards for both wages and overtime entitlement, and spells out administrative procedures by which covered work time must be compensated. Under the law, overtime is computed at 1-1/2 times the rate of basic pay for work exceeding 8 hours a day or 40 hours a week. All overtime must be approved in advance.

Within-Grade Increases

Employees are eligible for within-grade increases, unless they are denied for poor performance, after the following waiting periods: 52 weeks for advancement to steps 2-4; 104 weeks for advancement to steps 5-7; and 156 weeks for advancement to steps 8-10.

Leave

Annual Leave

Annual leave can be used for whatever purposes you desire. Most people use it for vacations and personal business. Except for emergencies, annual leave must be authorized in advance by your supervisor.

An employee accrues annual leave for each full pay period of employment unless he/she is in a nonpay status for the entire pay period. Annual leave is earned on the basis of the number of years of Federal employment, including creditable military service. The following table outlines the annual leave categories and the accrual rates for each:

Full-Time Employees:

Less than 3 years of service	4 hour leave category	13 days a year
3 years but less than 15 years of service	6 hour leave category	20 days a year
15 years or more of service	8 hour leave category	26 days a year

Part-Time Employees: (One hour of leave is accrued for each)

Less than 3 years of service	20 hours in pay status
3 years but less than 15 years of service	13 hours in pay status
15 years or more of service	10 hours in pay status

Pay status hours which do not equal the number necessary for a minimum leave credit are carried over from one pay period to the next to accumulate toward future leave credits. Employees can carry 30 days (240 hours) of unused annual leave from year to year. You are advised to use your annual leave throughout the year in order to avoid losing accrued leave above the 30-day limit.

Sick Leave

Sick leave may be used when you (1) receive medical, dental, or optical examination or treatment (2) are incapacitated by physical or mental illness, injury, pregnancy, or childbirth (3) because of exposure to a communicable disease, jeopardize the health of others by your presence on the job (4) must be absent from work for adoption-related activities.

In addition, you may use a limited amount of sick leave to (1) provide care for a family member as the result of physical or mental illness, injury, pregnancy, childbirth, or medical, dental, or optical examination or treatment; or (2) make arrangements necessitated by the death of a family member or attend the funeral of a family member. For more information about Family Leave benefits, talk to your Supervisor and/or Human Resources.

For full-time employees, the sick leave accrual rate is 13 days a year; for part-time employees, it's one hour for each 20 hours in pay status. There is no limit on how much can be accumulated.

There are other forms of leave including compensatory time off; family and medical leave, time off as a form of performance recognition; leave without pay used instead of paid leave for various purposes with supervisory approval, and military leave.

Holidays

There are 10 legal holidays:

- New Years Day—January 1
- Birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr. —Third Monday in January
- Presidents Day—Third Monday in February
- Memorial Day—Last Monday in May
- Independence Day—July 4
- Labor Day—First Monday in September
- Columbus Day—Second Monday in October
- Veterans Day—November 11
- Thanksgiving Day—Fourth Thursday in November
- Christmas Day—December 25

Health Insurance

The Federal Employees Health Benefits (FEHB) program is designed to help protect you and eligible family members from the expenses of illness and accident. Unlike many private sector health benefit plans, it provides coverage without physical examination, places no restrictions on age or physical condition, offers a wide range of plans to choose from, and cannot be canceled by the plan in which you enroll. You must enroll within 60 days of the beginning of your employment otherwise you will have to wait until the next open season.

You and the government share the cost of the FEHB program. On average, the government pays approximately 70 percent of the cost. You pay your share of the premium through a payroll deduction. You can use your FEHB benefits as soon as your coverage is effective. There are no waiting periods, required medical examinations, or restrictions because of age or physical condition.

There are two types of enrollment in each FEHB plan: self only, which provides benefits only to you; and self and family, providing benefits to you and all eligible family members. A self and family enrollment covers you, your spouse, and your unmarried dependent children under age 22.

You can choose from among fee for service (FFS) plans, regardless of where you live, or plans offering a point of service (POS) product and health maintenance organizations (HMO) if you live (or sometimes if you work) within the area serviced by the plan.

Each November the government holds an “open season” in which you may change plans or change levels of coverage if you wish. You can make open season changes by using the Employee Express web site <http://www.employeeexpress.gov>.

Federal employees can use pre-tax dollars to pay health insurance premiums to the Federal Employees Health Benefits Program under the "Premium Conversion" program. Premium conversion uses Federal tax rules to let employees deduct their share of health insurance premiums from their taxable income, thereby reducing their taxes. Check with your servicing HR office for more information.

Flexible Spending Accounts

FSAFEDS is a program which can help employees save taxes. You may set up an account, which will allow pre-tax dollars to be used for health care expenses for you and your family, which is not covered by your health insurance. More information is at: <http://www.FSAFEDS.Com>

Life Insurance

The Federal Employees' Group Life Insurance (FEGLI) program provides group term life insurance. In most cases, employees are automatically covered by basic life insurance. In addition to the basic, there are three forms of optional insurance that you can elect. You must have basic insurance in order to elect any of the options. Unlike basic, enrollment in optional insurance is not automatic—you must take action to elect the options.

Unlike the Federal health benefits program, which has annual opportunities to join or change coverage levels, FEGLI elections of coverage must be made when first offered.

The cost of basic insurance is shared between you and the government. You pay 2/3 of the total cost and the government pays 1/3. Your age does not affect the cost of basic insurance. You pay the full cost of optional insurance; the cost of optional insurance depends on your age. For insurance withholding purposes, the government assumes you reach an age in the first pay period that starts after your birthday.

Permanent Federal employees, including part-time employees, are eligible to enroll. Basic life insurance coverage is effective on the first day you enter in a pay and duty status unless you waive this coverage before the end of your first pay period. You may waive basic at any time. Optional insurance generally must be elected within 31 days of appointment. For more information check <http://www.opm.gov/insure/>.

Long Term Care Insurance (LTC)

Long Term Care insurance is available. New employees must apply within the first 60 days after they are hired. They will use an abbreviated application. Should they sign up at a later date they will be required to complete a full underwriting application. There are not scheduled open season dates to apply after the initial 60 days. It is expected that there will occasionally be an open season. The cost is based on the age of the employee and becomes more expensive with age. See the website for more information and frequently asked questions <http://www.opm.gov/insure/ltc/index.asp>

Hospital Insurance Tax (Hit)

All employees contribute a portion of their earnings towards the Medicare Hospital Insurance Tax. This tax is included in the FICA deductions for employees who pay the social security tax; while other employees have a specified amount withheld from their salary. HIT or FICA taxes are taken from an employee's gross earnings and FICA taxes are discontinued when yearly earnings reach the maximum wage base level determined by the Social Security Administration.

Retirement

Most likely you are in the Federal Employees Retirement System (FERS). That system covers employees hired after January 1, 1984. However, if you had previous Federal employment under the "old" Federal retirement program, the Civil Service Retirement System (CSRS), and were rehired, you may have been rehired under that system, called CSRS-Offset, which is a mix of CSRS and Social Security coverage. For more information about retirement, see the OPM website at <http://www.opm.gov/retire/> or contact Human Resources.

FERS is a three-part retirement system consisting of Social Security coverage, a civil service annuity, and the Thrift Savings Plan. In general, FERS employees contribute 7.0 percent of pay to cover the cost of their benefits: 10.8 percent is paid to the civil service retirement fund that covers their basic annuity benefit and 6.0 percent goes to pay for Social Security benefits.

In addition, employees pay 1.45 percent for Medicare coverage; there is no cap on Medicare deductions.

FERS employees retiring after 30 years will receive a basic benefit equal to 30 percent of their high-3 years of average salary. FERS employees will be eligible for a Social Security benefit at age 62.

Survivor Benefits upon Death of Employee

Federal retirement systems protect your loved ones. Under FERS the surviving spouse of an employee who had at least 18 months of creditable civilian service may be eligible for a basic employee death benefit, so long as the spouse was married to the deceased for an aggregate of at least nine months (the nine-month requirement does not apply if the death was accidental); or was the parent of a child born of the marriage (including one born posthumously, or out of wedlock if the parties later married).

Thrift Savings Plan

The Thrift Savings Plan (TSP) is a valuable way to build up a nest egg for your retirement. It's the government's version of the popular 401(k) plan. The TSP is a payroll withholding based plan. Investments are from pre-tax dollars and investment earnings are tax deferred until withdrawn. FERS employees are allowed to invest up to threshold set annually by the IRS, which is currently \$15,500. Your agency will automatically contribute an amount equal to 1 percent of your basic pay each pay period. You make your own contribution by payroll deductions and your agency matches those contributions according to the following schedule:

FERS Employee Investment - Agency Match

First 3% of basic pay, \$1.00 for each \$1.00 you invest

Next 2% of basic pay, \$0.50 for each \$1.00 you invest

No government matching funds are paid for amounts above 5% of basic pay;

Currently CSRS and CSRS-Offset employees may invest up to \$15,500 in the program; they receive no government contributions.

The TSP holds open seasons twice a year in which you can begin investments, change the amount of investment or change the allocation of how much money you have going into each of the TSPs investment funds. You also can move your account balances among the funds whenever you choose, up to once a month, through inter-fund transfers. The TSP sends participants statements during the open seasons showing their account balances, loan status, vesting status, and other information.

You can begin contributing your own money to the TSP within 60 days of being hired as a Federal employee. Your payroll contributions will begin the first full pay period after your agency accepts your TSP Election Form (TSP-1).

Beginning in the last month of the second open season after you are hired, your agency will start to contribute Agency Automatic (1%) Contributions and the Agency Matching Contributions to your account. Depending on how the open season coincides with a hiring date, this could mean a wait of nearly a year. Agency matching contributions don't start until the employee's own investments begin.

Investment Choices

Currently, the TSP has six investment funds available:

- the Government Securities Investment Fund (G Fund) which are special Treasury issues;
- the Common Stock Index Fund (C Fund) which tracks the Standard and Poor's 500 index of large U.S. stocks;
- the Fixed Income Index Investment Fund (F Fund) is a combination of Corporate and Government bonds;
- the Small Capitalization Stock Index Investment Fund (S Fund), tracking the Wilshire 4500 and
- the International Stock Index Investment Fund (I Fund) which tracks the Morgan Stanley EAFE index. The L Funds diversify participant accounts among the G, F, C, S, and I Funds, using professionally determined investment mixes (allocations) that are tailored to different time horizons.

In-Service Loans and Withdrawals

You may gain access to your money during your working career through loans (and in-service withdrawals). When you take a TSP loan, you are borrowing from yourself. Loans are repaid through payroll allotments over the payment period specified in the loan agreement. You can repay the loan in full—plus any unpaid interest—before the end of your loan repayment schedule without penalty.

For more information regarding TSP, please use the TSP website at <http://www.tsp.gov> or the TSP Thrift-Line at (504) 255-8777.

Types of Appointments

There are various types of Federal appointments. You will receive a copy of Form SF-50-B, “Notification of Personnel Action”. The “nature of action” block will indicate the type of appointment you have. Your particular type of appointment will determine your eligibility for Federal benefits.

- **Career-Conditional Appointment** – This is the most common type of appointment. You must serve a probationary period of 1 year. If your service is satisfactory for 3 continuous years in this appointment, you may be converted to a career appointment.
- **Career Appointment** – After you serve your probationary period and complete 3 continuous years of service, you can expect to be converted to a career appointment. This is a permanent appointment within the Federal Service and provides you with greater employment and job retention rights.
- **Excepted Appointment**– Certain positions are excepted from the normal requirements of competitive service. Many excepted appointments (180 day limit type) have a limit of two years on the position. Employees appointed to excepted positions do not go through the same kind of competitive process as career or career-conditional appointees; therefore, they do not receive the same benefits or employment rights.
- **TERM Appointment** – The Agency may make a term appointment for a period of more than one year, but not more than four years when the need for an employee’s services is not permanent. Reasons for making a term appointment include, but are not limited to: project work; extraordinary workload; scheduled abolishment, reorganization, or contracting out of the function; uncertainty of future funding; or the need to maintain permanent positions for placement of employees who would otherwise be displaced from other parts of the organization.
- **Temporary Appointment** – Occasionally, the Agency needs employees for immediate short-term jobs. Employees in temporary appointments do not receive the same benefits as permanent employees. They do not have the same employment rights, do not participate in the retirement system, and are not eligible for health and life insurance benefits.

Travel

Many employees travel to attend training courses or to conduct official Government business. An employee on official travel is expected to exercise the prudent care in incurring expenses. All travel is to be coordinated with your supervisor to avoid overtime compensation work periods (when possible) and high travel costs. Discuss travel with your supervisor prior to making final travel plans. Travel authorizations need to be completed prior to travel and are issued through the State Office.

Per Diem

All travel must be approved by your supervisor. If you are required to travel for these purposes, you will be reimbursed for expenses essential to the transaction of official business. Allowable costs include transportation, per diem, which consists of lodging up to a certain amount, and a meal and incidental expenses (M&IE) allowance. Not all expenses incurred while traveling are considered necessary. Please refer to your agencies General Manual or Procedure for more specific details on travel. For a complete United States per diem chart see GSA website at <http://www.gsa.gov/perdiem>.

Government Travel Credit Card

Employees are mandated to use their government-issued travel charge card to pay for reimbursable travel expenses. All permanent employees who travel at least five times a year must participate in the government travel charge card program.

Employees who use the charge card for inappropriate or non-official purposes or who fail to pay their account balance in a timely manner will be subject to disciplinary action, which can range from a letter of reprimand to removal from duty.

Government Owned Vehicles (GOV)

Government owned vehicles (GOV), when available may be used by employees for official purposes only. When possible, as assigned, GOV will be shared with other personnel to eliminate the use of a privately-owned vehicle. If an employee is required to be an incidental motor vehicle operator they are required to maintain a valid State Driver's License. Employees who fail to maintain a valid driver's license or who misuse a GOV may be subject to disciplinary action including possible removal. Willful misuse of government owned vehicles carries a mandatory penalty of 30 days suspension without pay.

Procedures for reporting a vehicle accident are located in the GM 120-405 (Personal Property).

Job Protections

Anti-Discrimination Laws

Federal employees are protected from discrimination under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Age Discrimination in Employment Act of 1967, and the Equal Pay Act of 1963, and Section 501 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. These laws are enforced by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission <http://www.eeoc.gov>. Generally speaking, under those laws it is illegal to discriminate in any aspect of employment including: hiring and firing; compensation, assignment, or classification of employees; transfer, promotion, layoff, or recall and recruitment and testing. Discriminatory practices under those laws also include harassment on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, national origin, disability, or age.

NRCS has a zero tolerance for sexual harassment. NRCS strives for a safe work environment. Unwelcome verbal, nonverbal, physical advance, request for sexual favors, or other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature should be reported immediately to supervisors or other responsible management officials.

Title VII also prohibits discrimination because of participation in schools or places of worship associated with a particular racial, ethnic, or religious group. The law prohibits not only intentional discrimination, but also practices that have the effect of discriminating against individuals because of their race, color, national origin, religion, or sex.

Appeal Rights

Career employees receiving disciplinary actions from their supervisor may be eligible to appeal to the Merit Systems Protection Board (MSPB). Another form of appeal is the administrative grievance, which normally covers workplace disputes and disciplinary actions not within the MSPBs jurisdiction. NRCS encourages early resolution of workplace and program disputes using the Alternative Dispute Resolution Program. These procedures vary, contact Human Resources.

Ethics and Political Activities

Ethical Conduct

Underlying ethical principles for federal employees are two core concepts:

- employees shall not use public office for private gain; and
- employees shall act impartially and not give preferential treatment to any private organization or individual.

In addition, employees must avoid any action that would create the appearance that they are violating the law or ethical standards. For more information see <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/intranet/ethics>

Rules govern subjects such as giving or accepting gifts, outside employment, abuse of position, required financial disclosures in certain situations, and similar matters. New employees receive a copy of the “Standards of Ethical Conduct for Employees in the Executive Branch” and are allowed one hour of time to review the ethics regulations;

Government Property

Employees have a duty to protect and conserve government property and should not use government property for other than authorized purposes. Government property includes items such as office supplies, telephone and other telecommunications equipment and services, government mail, printing and reproduction facilities, government records, and government vehicles.

NRCS policy provides for limited personal use of government telecommunications equipment on an occasional basis, provided that the use involves minimal expense to the government and does not interfere with official business. Occasional personal use of telecommunications resources shall normally take place during the employee’s personal time.

While the occasional use of telecommunications resources in moderation is acceptable, uses not conforming the NRCS policy are strictly prohibited. Employees are expected to conduct themselves professionally in the workplace and to refrain from using telecommunications equipment for activities that are inappropriate or offensive to co-workers or the public, such as sexually explicit materials or remarks that ridicule others on the basis or race, creed, religion, color, sex, handicap, national origin, or sexual orientation. Questions concerning appropriate use of Government telecommunications equipment should be addressed to your supervisor.

Political Activities

Under the 1939 Hatch Act, Federal employees face restrictions on their ability to participate in political activities. Congress amended the Hatch Act in 1993 to permit more political activity although many restrictions still apply. Certain agencies and categories of employees, primarily in national security and law enforcement, are covered by the stricter rules that predate that amendment.

Generally speaking, Federal employees covered by the 1993 amendments *may*:

- be candidates for public office in nonpartisan elections;
- register and vote as they choose;
- assist in voter registration drives;
- express opinions about candidates and issues;
- contribute money to political organizations;
- attend political fundraising functions;
- attend and be active at political rallies and meetings;
- join and be an active member of a political party or club;
- sign nominating petitions;
- campaign for or against referendum questions, constitutional amendments, or municipal ordinances;
- campaign for or against candidates in partisan elections;
- make campaign speeches for candidates in partisan elections;
- distribute campaign literature in partisan elections; and
- hold office in political clubs or parties.

They *may not*:

- use official authority or influence to interfere with an election;
- solicit or discourage political activity of anyone with business before their agency;
- solicit or receive political contributions (may be done in certain limited situations by federal labor or other employee organizations);
- be candidates for public office in partisan elections;
- engage in political activity while on duty, in a government office, wearing an official uniform or using a government vehicle; or
- wear political buttons on duty.

Promotions and Transfers

Agencies may promote, demote or reassign employees under a variety of circumstances. General Schedule employees who are promoted to a higher grade will receive a pay increase of at least two steps of the former grade.

A career or career-conditional employee of one agency may transfer, without a break in service, to a competitive service position in another agency without competing in a civil service examination open to the public. A transfer-eligible may apply under vacancy announcements open to status candidates. An employee may transfer to a position at the same, higher, or lower grade level.

To transfer, they must meet the qualification requirements for the position. If the current appointment is subject to a suitability investigation, that condition continues after the transfer.

Position Classification

Under the General Schedule (GS) system, <http://www.opm.gov/qualifications/INDEX.asp>. jobs are categorized by occupational groups, series, classes, and grades. The system is designed to provide a systematic grouping of positions by kind of work, level of difficulty and responsibility, and required qualifications of the position. This system ensures that positions that are similar require comparable qualifications, and that employees who are doing substantially equal work receive equal pay.

The classification system is based on a set of written standards and guides, which are used by trained specialists to evaluate and classify positions. Standards are issued by the Office of Personnel Management for use throughout the Government. Consequently, employee performance is not considered in the classification process. Employee performance is rewarded through a system of within-grade increases, quality increases, and awards for superior accomplishment. Other factors not considered in classifying a position are volume of work performed, employee's length of service, or superior qualifications.

Position Description

Your supervisor will provide you with a description of your job. A position description is the official record of your major duties and responsibilities and the supervisory relationship of your position.

The duties and responsibilities that have been assigned to you will determine your title, the kind of position you occupy, the level or grade, series, and also the base pay that you will receive for performing the work.

If significant changes take place in your job, your supervisor should take immediate steps to see that a new position description is prepared and submitted for classification review. She/he must make certain that it represents the current duties and responsibilities that are assigned to you.

You and your supervisor have joint responsibility for reviewing your position description, for accuracy and adequacy.

Performance Standards

All employees must have an individual performance plan. A performance work plan is a written document that identifies critical elements of an employee's position and the standards by which they will be rated. A critical element is a work assignment or responsibility of such importance that unacceptable performance on the element would result in a determination that the employee's overall performance is at the unacceptable or "Results Not Achieved" level. Non-critical duties are not included in performance plans.

Communication between the rating official and the employee is essential in developing performance work plans. There should be a common understanding about the expectations for performance. In addition, there should be a discussion of the goals of the individual work unit and the employee's involvement, or contribution to unit goals for the upcoming year.

Employee Assistance Program (EAP)

The Employee Assistance Program (EAP) helps employees resolve personal and work problems through professional assistance. The EAP helps with the following types of problems – marital, financial, alcohol, drugs, family, vocational, work related stress, legal referral, weight/weight loss, physical/medical, dependent care, emotional/psychological, and any other problems that may surface.

EAP encourages voluntary participation. If a person thinks they have a problem, they call the EAP number and set up an appointment. A professional EAP counselor will work directly and confidentially with the employee or family member to help resolve the problem. In some cases, the EAP counselor's role will be to assist in determining what additional community resources can provide future assistance.

The cost of EAP is covered by your employer. Costs associated with referral may be covered by Medical benefits.

Currently the EAP vendor is The Sand Creek Group, Inc. They can be contacted toll free at 888-243-5744, or TDD at 1-800-627-3529. Their web site for information is <http://www.sandcreekeap.com>.

Mentoring

The purpose of the program is to develop a support system and employee network connection to assist employees with an orientation to the structure of the NRCS in Wisconsin. It is further designed to provide opportunities for career development in the following ways:

- Promote a confidential and safe mentoring relationship
- Provide opportunity for personal and professional growth
- Increase staff morale and job satisfaction
- Improve present job skills and abilities of employees, which will increase their productivity and potential for higher-level jobs
- Aid in retention and recruitment of employees

MENTORING PROCESS

Employees interested in serving as mentors may complete the "Application for Mentors" form and return the completed form to the Human Resources Office for record keeping.

Employees may choose any employee from the list of mentors. Factors the employees should consider are: compatibility of mentor and employee career tracks, supervisory relationships, and possibly geographic proximity.

It is suggested that supervisors not serve as a mentor for employees they supervise. The mentor should be someone outside the chain of command.

Employees may also request the assistance of the Mentoring Coordinator and/or the Human Resources office in identifying potential mentors. The Human Resources office will provide copies of completed mentor applications to the interested employee. The employee is expected to initiate the contact with the mentor.

Common NRCS Acronyms

AAC	Area Administrative Coordinator
AC	Area Conservationist
ACP	Agricultural Conservation Program
ACRES	Actual Cost Recovery Evaluation System
ADA	Americans with Disabilities Act
ADMV	Administrative
ADP	Automated Data Processing
ADR	Alternative Dispute Resolution
AE	Area Engineer
AERP	Affirmative Employment Recruitment Program
AIHEC	American Indian Higher Education Council
AL	Annual Leave
AMS	Agricultural Marketing Service
AO	Area Office
APHIS	Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service
ARC	Area Resource Conservationist
ARS	Agricultural Research Service
ARSS	Area Resource Soil Scientist
ASAP	As Soon as Possible
ASTC-FO	Assistant State Conservationist – Field Operations
ASTC-O	Assistant State Conservationist – Operations
ASTC-P	Assistant State Conservationist - Programs
AWOL	Absent Without Leave
BIA	Bureau of Indian Affairs
BLM	Bureau of Land Management
BMP	Best Management Practices
CAC	County Administrative Committee
CAMS	Combined Administrative Management System
CCC	Commodity Credit Corporation
CCE	Common Computer Environment
CED	County Executive Director
CET	Civil Engineering Technician
CFC	Combined Federal Campaign
CFO	Chief Financial Officer
CFR	Code of Federal Regulations
CIO	Chief Information Officer
Clk Typ	Clerk Typist
CNTY	County
CO	Conservation Operations
COB	Close of Business
COLA	Cost of Living Adjustment
Compr Spec	Computer Specialist
CR	Office of Civil Rights
CRC	Civil Rights Committee
CRC	Cultural Resource Coordinator
RM	Coordinated Resource Management
CRP	Conservation Reserve Program
CSREES	Cooperative, State, Research, Education, and Extension Service
CSRS	Civil Service Retirement System
CST	Customer Service Toolkit
CTA	Conservation Technical Assistance
CTAP	Career Transition Assistance Program
CY	Calendar Year

DATCP	Department of Agriculture, Trade, and Consumer Protection
DC	District Conservationist
DD	District Director
EEEO	Deputy Equal Employment Opportunity Officer
DEU	Delegated Examining Unit
DFWP	Drug-Free Workplace Program
DNR	Department of Natural Resources
EA	Environmental Assessment
EAP	Employee Assistance Program
ECP	Emergency Conservation Program
EDP	Employee Development Plan
EEO	Equal Employment Opportunity
EEOC	Equal Employment Opportunity Commission
EIS	Environmental Impact Statement
Engr	Engineer
EOM	End of Month
EOY	End of Year
EPA	Environmental Protection Agency
EQIP	Environmental Quality Incentive Program
ERS	Economic Research Service
EWP	Emergency Watershed Program
EXP	Expires/Expiration
FAC	Food and Agriculture Council
FAIR	Federal Agriculture Improvement and Reform Act
FAS	Foreign Agricultural Service
FCA	Farm Credit Administration
FCC	Federal Communications Commission
FCIC	Federal Crop Insurance Corporation
FGLI	Federal Employees Group Life Insurance
FEHB	Federal Employees Health Benefits Program
FEMA	Federal Emergency Management Agency
FERS	Federal Employees Retirement System
FFIS	Foundation Financial Information System
FIP	Forestry Incentive Program
FLP	Farm Loan Programs
FLRA	Federal Labor Relations Authority
FLSA	Fair Labor Standards Act
FMD	Financial Management Division
FmHA	Farmers Home Administration
FMLA	Family and Medical Leave Act
FNM	Financial Management
FNS	Food and Nutrition Service
FO	Field Office
FOIA	Freedom of Information Act
FOTG	Field Office Technical Guide
FPP	Farmland Protection Program
FPPA	Farmland Protection Policy Act of 1991
FRM BILLC	Farm Bill Compliance
FS (USFS)	Forest Service
FSA	Farm Service Agency
FSA	Food Security Act of 1985
FSIS	Food Safety and Inspection Service
FT	Full -Time
FTE	Full -Time Equivalent

FTS	Federal Telecommunications System
FWP	Federal Women's Program
FWPM	Federal Women's Program Manager
FWS	Fish and Wildlife Service
FY	Fiscal Year
FYI	For Your Information
GAO	General Accounting Office
GIS	Geographic Information System
GLCI	Grazing Lands Conservation Initiative
GM	General Manual
GOV	Government-Owned Vehicle
GPO	Government Printing Office
GPRA	Government Performance and Results Act
GS	General Schedule
GSA	General Services Administration
HACU	Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities
HBCU	Historically Black Colleges and Universities
HEL	Highly Erodible Land
HEP	Hispanic Employment Program
HEPM	Hispanic Employees Program Manager
HR	Human Resources
HRM	Human Resources Management
IAS	Integrated Accountability System
ICC	Interstate Commerce Commission
ICTAP	Interagency Career Transition Assistance Program
IDP	Individual Development Plan
IRMS	Information Resources Management Service
IT	Information Technology
KCCC	Kansas City Computer Center
KSA	Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities
LAN	Local Area Network
LCC	Land Conservation Committee
LCD	Land Conservation Department
LDP	Loan Deficiency Payment
LESA	Land Evaluation and Site Assessment
LWOP	Leave Without Pay
M&IE	Meals and Incidental Expenses
MGMT	Management
MLRA	Major Land Resource Area
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
MSPB	Merit Systems Protection Board
MT	Management Team
MWRO	Midwest Regional Office
NACD	National Association of Conservation Districts
NASCOE	National Association of FSA County Office Employees
NASS	National Agricultural Statistics Service
NCC	National Computer Center (Ft. Collins, CO and Kansas City, MO)
NEDS	National Employee Development Staff
NEPA	National Environmental Policy Act
NFAC	National Food and Agriculture Council
NFC	National Finance Center

NFSAM	National Food Security Act Manual
NHCP	National Handbook of Conservation Practices
NHPA	National Historic Preservation Act
NHQ	National Headquarters
NLT	No Later Than
NOC	National Outreach Council
NPPH	National Planning Procedures Handbook
NRCS	Natural Resources Conservation Service
NRI	National Resources Inventory
NTE	Not to Exceed
O&M	Operation and Maintenance
OA	Office Automation
OGC	Office of General Counsel
OIG	Office of the Inspector General
OJT	On-the-job training
OMB	Office of Management and Budget
OO	Office of Operations
OPF	Official Personnel Folder
OPM	Office of Personnel Management
OSEC	Office of the Secretary
OSHA	Occupational Safety and Health Administration
OTI	Opportunity to Improve
OWCP	Office of Workers Compensation Programs
PA	Program Assistant (FSA)
PAS	Public Affairs Staff
PC	Personal Computer
PD	Per Diem
PD	Position Description
PDT	Program Delivery Team
Per	Personnel
PFT	Permanent Full-time
PMC	Plant Materials Center
PMC	Position Management Committee
PMS	Personnel Management Specialist
POV	Privately Owned Vehicle
PP	Pay Period
PPT	Permanent Part-time
PRMS	Performance and Results Measurement System (NRCS)
Pub. L.(P.L.)	Public Law
QIP	Quality Improvement Process
QSI	Quality Step Increase
RAMP	Rural Abandoned Mine Program
RC	Regional Conservationist
RC&D	Resources Conservation and Development
RD	Rural Development
REG	Regulation
RH	Rural Housing
RIF	Reduction-In-Force
RMA	Risk Management Agency
RMS	Resource Management Systems
RO	Regional Office

SAC	State Administrative Committee
SAO	State Administrative Officer
SBA	Small Business Administration
SC	Soil Conservationist
SCEP	Student Career Experience Program
SCD	Soil Conservation District
SCE	State Conservation Engineer
SCT	Soil Conservation Technician
SEPM	Special Emphasis Program Manager
SES	Senior Executive Service
SF	Standard Form
SHPO	State Historic Preservation Officer
SL	Sick Leave
SO	State Office
SOC	State Outreach Council
SS	Soil Scientist
SSA	Social Security Administration
SSL	Soil Survey Leader
SSN	Social Security Number
SSO	Soil Survey Office
SSS	State Soil Scientist
STC	State Conservationist for NRCS
STEP	Student Temporary Employment Program
SWCD	Soil and Water Conservation District
SWCS	Soil and Water Conservation Society
T&A	Time and Attendance
TCAS	Total Cost Accounting System
TDD	Telecommunication Device for the Deaf
TQM	Total Quality Management
TSP	Thrift Savings Plan or Technical Service Providers
U.S.C.	United States Code
USDA	United States Department of Agriculture
USGS	United States Geological Survey
W/	With
W/O	Without
WALCE	Wisconsin Association of Land Conservation Employees
WAN	Wide Area Network
WG	Wage Grade
WGI	Within Grade Increase
WHIP	Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program
WLA	Workload Analysis Initiative
WQIP	Water Quality Incentive Program

Useful Websites

<http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/> - Natural Resources Conservation Service Home Page

<http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/> - USDA Home Page

<http://www.opm.gov/> - U. S. Office of Personnel Management

<http://www.usajobs.opm.gov> - OPM Job Listing Site

<http://www.firstgov.com/> - FirstGov, information about federal agencies

<http://www.nhq.nrcs.usda.gov/ethics/> - NRCS Ethics Page

<http://www.eeoc.gov> - U. S. Equal Opportunity Commission

<https://www.nfc.usda.gov/personal/> - National Finance Center Personal Home Page

<http://www.tsp.gov/> - Thrift Savings Plan Home Page

<http://www.sandcreekeap.com> – Employee Assistance Program

<http://www.nedc.nrcs.usda.gov> - National Employee Development Center

<http://www.FSAFEDS.COM> - Flexible Spending Accounts information