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**Classification Appeal Decision  
Under section 5112 of title 5, United States Code**

**Appellant:** [appellant's name]

**Agency classification:** Operations Research Analyst  
GS-1515-12

**Organization:** [name]  
Section  
[name] Unit  
[name] Research Station  
Forest Service  
U.S. Department of Agriculture  
[location]

**OPM decision:** Operations Research Analyst  
GS-1515-12

**OPM decision number:** C-1515-12-01

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Robert D. Hendler  
Classification Appeals Officer

10/30/00  
Date

As provided in section 511.612 of title 5, Code of Federal Regulations (CFR), this decision constitutes a certificate that is mandatory and binding on all administrative, certifying, payroll, disbursing, and accounting officials of the government. The agency is responsible for reviewing its classification decisions for identical, similar, or related positions to ensure consistency with this decision. There is no right of further appeal. This decision is subject to discretionary review only under conditions and time limits specified in the Introduction to the Position Classification Standards (PCS's), appendix 4, section G (address provided in appendix 4, section H).

**Decision sent to:**

PERSONAL

[appellant's name]  
[name] Research Station  
Forest Service  
U.S. Department of Agriculture  
[address]

[name]  
Personnel Officer  
[name] Research Station  
Forest Service  
U.S. Department of Agriculture  
[address]

Ms. Donna D. Beecher  
USDA-OHRM-OD  
U.S. Department of Agriculture  
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Washington, DC 20250

## **Introduction**

On July 14, 2000, the Philadelphia Oversight Division of the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM) accepted a classification appeal from [appellant's name]. Her position is currently classified as Operations Research Analyst, GS-1515-12. The appellant believes the classification should be Operations Research Analyst, GS-1515-13. She works in the [name] [acronym] Section, [name] Unit [acronym], [name] Research Station, Forest Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, [location]. We have accepted and decided her appeal under section 5112 of title 5, United States Code (U.S.C.).

## **General issues**

The appellant has compared her position to others within the organization, raised questions about the accuracy of previous classification appeal decisions by her agency, and provided comments by fellow employees. By law, we must classify positions solely by comparing their duties and responsibilities to OPM PCS's and guidelines (5 U.S.C. 5106, 5107, and 5112). Other methods or factors of evaluation are not authorized for use in determining the classification of a position, e.g., comparisons to the duties and responsibilities of other positions that may or may not be classified correctly. Our decision sets aside all previous agency decisions regarding the classification of the position in question. Information contained in those decisions and comments by fellow employees of the appellant are relevant only insofar as they clarify the duties and responsibilities assigned to and performed by the appellant.

The appellant has cited specific portions of the Operations Research Analysis, GS-1515, PCS and applied them to her position. The PCS presents concepts rather than literal definitions. Those concepts must be applied within the full contexts of the factor level definitions and illustrations provided. Words and phrases must be examined in context. The appellant provided a list of her publications and presentations and printed copies of some of them. In classification, authorship gives no specific predictable grade level meaning to an assignment. We must assess the grade level worth by applying the PCS to the work underlying the presentation, article, or other publication.

We conducted a telephone audit with the appellant on October 6, 2000, and telephone interviews with the appellant's first-level supervisor, [name], on October 10, 2000, and October 16, 2000. In deciding this appeal, we fully considered the audit findings and all information of record, including examples of the appellant's work, furnished by her at our request, and her current work assignments. Other information provided by the appellant was considered to the extent that it was relevant to determine the duties and responsibilities assigned to and performed by her.

The appellant agrees her current position description (PD) of record (# NE9845) is a complete and accurate description of the work she performs with the stipulations she includes in her attachment of June 24, 2000, to that PD. We find the PD of record contains the major delegated responsibilities performed by the appellant and we incorporate it by reference into this decision. A PD is the official record of the major duties and responsibilities assigned to a position by a

responsible management official; i.e., a person with authority to assign work to a position. A **position** is the duties and responsibilities that make up the work performed by an employee. Title 5, U.S.C. 5106 prescribes the duties, responsibilities and qualifications required by those duties and responsibilities as the basis for determining the classification of a position. The Introduction to the Position Classification Standards (Introduction) further provides that "As a rule, a position is classified on the basis of the duties actually performed." Additionally, 5 CFR 511.607(a)(1), in discussing PD accuracy issues, provides that OPM will decide classification appeals on the basis of the actual duties and responsibilities assigned by management **and** performed by the employee. The point here is that it is a real operating position that is classified, and not simply the PD or available documents. Therefore, this decision must be based on the actual work assigned to and performed by the appellant and will resolve the issue of PD accuracy. We will consider the appellant's stipulations to her PD insofar as they clarify the duties and responsibilities assigned to her position and performed by her.

### **Position information**

A Supervisory Forester, GS-460-13, heads [acronym]. Aside from the section head, the three other members of the appellant's section are two Research Foresters, grades GS-13 and GS-12, and a grade GS-11 Forester. The appellant is the sole Operations Research Analyst in [acronym], which has a staff of 24 permanent full-time scientists and supporting personnel and approximately 40 seasonal, professional, and technical employees. [Acronym] is responsible for conducting a program of research to inventory and evaluate past trends, current status, and potential productivity, supply, and use of the renewable natural resources of the forest lands in the 13 [section of United States] states served by the [name] Research Station. The staff works closely with the staffs of similar projects at five other research stations to produce national and regional assessments of forest resources.

The appellant analyzes forest resource data, evaluates existing mathematical models, defines modeling needs and develops models for addressing specific problems such as predicting resource attributes, developing classification rules, and conducting resource trend analyses. She evaluates and suggests new models where appropriate, develops hypotheses about natural resource conditions, and tests these hypotheses through analyses of resource data. She assures that proper analytical techniques are applied to the data and refines current techniques or develops new ones when necessary. Examples of work performed by the appellant include investigating improved forest growth models to help forest managers investigate alternative management procedures, providing managers information on shifts in relative stocking of important tree species of the [area of] United States, evaluating existing procedures and developing new alternatives to improve presentation of data collected by [acronym], and summarizing data to answer client requests. As the resident expert in operations research, statistics, and certain areas of mathematics, she represents [acronym] and [acronym] at meetings and conferences where such expertise is needed.

### **Series, title, and standard determination**

The appellant believes her position might be classifiable under the Research Grade Evaluation Guide (RGEN) at a higher grade than her current grade of GS-12. Operations research, by its very nature, requires knowledge of multiple scientific disciplines. By definition, it requires selecting and applying appropriate theories and methods to the assignment at hand. However, the primary function of the appellant's position is to collect and analyze data involving forest resource use. She uses existing, or modified, mathematical and statistical models to provide accurate current data and projections for Forest Service management to make resource policy and management decisions. In contrast, the RGEN is applied to positions whose primary function is the development of new and fuller scientific knowledge of the subject studied, with or without specific applications. The RGEN examples include research to determine the interrelationship of physical or biological phenomena; to develop principles, criteria, methods, and a body of data of general applicability; and to develop experimental means of investigating such phenomena and processes. Among the critical criteria to determine applicability of the RGEN is that systematic investigation of theory, experimentation, or simulation of experiments predominantly characterizes the position. Although the appellant must occasionally modify existing models and procedures to the extent that she makes contributions to the advancement of the relevant scientific fields, such contributions are tangential to her assignments. They occur as an occasional necessary modification of the means necessary to complete her regular assignments rather than as the chief characteristic or primary responsibility of the position. The primary responsibilities and duties of the position are data collection and analyses. As such, the RGEN does not apply.

The agency has placed the appellant's position in the Operations Research Series, GS-1515, for which there is a published PCS, and titled it Operations Research Analyst, indicating it is a nonsupervisory position. Based on the position's exclusion from RGEN coverage, we concur.

### **Grade determination**

The Operations Research Series, GS-1515, PCS is in narrative format that uses two factors for grade level determination: (1) *Assignment characteristics* and (2) *Level of responsibility*.

#### *Assignment characteristics*

This factor deals with the size, scope, and complexity of the assignment; the nature of the functions performed; and the degrees of creativity and judgment involved.

As at the GS-12 grade level, the appellant independently conducts complete projects of limited scope in a narrow subject-matter area or serves as a team member with responsibility for portions of broadly defined projects and has knowledge of the overall forestry system to complete technically competent analyses. She may recommend areas of exploration to her supervisor and pursue them subject to his approval. After receiving approval, she is responsible for examining the underlying relationships, selecting appropriate methods or techniques from a variety of possible alternatives, and drawing conclusions that are accepted as technically authoritative. The

variables and data with which she deals may be complex but the resulting conclusions are usually not controversial.

As at the GS-12 grade level, the appellant frequently needs to modify or adapt techniques and procedures to meet situational requirements. Although precedents and guidelines are often available, they are generally inadequate, inappropriate, or lacking for major aspects of the project. For example, the appellant identified neural networks as a superior modeling tool for forest inventory data, where the relationships between the dependent and independent variables are unknown, possibly nonlinear, outliers exist and noise may be present in the data. She also identified support vector methods, a new classification tool in the data mining literature, as a classifier of individual tree mortality, and identified geostatics, a sub-discipline of applied statistics, as the best tool for making a continuous map of the high value trees across a region. These modifications and original applications of existing procedures resulted in findings of sufficient interest to professionals both within and outside the field of forestry to result in publication in professional journals or presentation at professional conferences.

The appellant's work closely resembles Illustration #1 at the GS-12 grade level in the PCS. As in the illustration, she is responsible for conducting quantitative analyses of biological populations using population dynamics models and techniques associated with multivariate statistics line transect analysis and matrix analysis, designing appropriate data bases for conducting analyses, evaluating data, interpreting results, and preparing technical reports. Similar to the illustration, she is responsible for data analysis, modeling, and special studies of species in a designated geographical area, and designing and conducting appropriate surveys to collect that data. Also as in the illustration, the appellant serves as a primary source of information to the team on statistical design of experiments and preparation of technical reports.

In contrast, at the GS-13 grade level, technical precedents and guidelines are generally not available at all, or those that exist only provide a framework or foundation for departure. Although the appellant demonstrates innovation by applying standard techniques in new or creative fashions or applying techniques that were developed for unrelated purposes, technical precedents are generally available and the innovative analytical approaches or creative manner in which the techniques are applied does not meet the intent of the GS-13 grade level PCS, as reflected in the context provided in the illustrations in the PCS. The illustrations include such examples as being independently responsible for planning, designing and developing performance requirements and methodologies for testing major, complex systems in an operational environment when precedents are few, nonexistent, or only vaguely applicable.

The scope, complexity, and effect of the appellant's assignments do not meet the difficulty of the GS-13 grade level assignments as typified by this illustration. Conducting quantitative analyses of biological populations using population dynamics models and the techniques discussed previously reflect problems that are more structured and do not present the uncertainty inherent at the GS-13 grade level. GS-13 grade level assignments also involve work of high visibility, unusual urgency, or program criticality. The appellant's assignments contribute to overall efficiency and efficacy of the operation of [acronym] in particular and [acronym] in general, but

are not of the visibility, urgency, or program criticality envisioned at the GS-13 grade level. Accordingly, this factor is credited properly at the GS-12 grade level.

### *Level of responsibility*

This factor includes the nature and extent of supervisory control exercised over the work, of personal contacts, of responsibility for project formulation, and the significance of recommendations and advice rendered. It is measured by the degree to which the analyst is held accountable for formulating and structuring problems, specifying alternatives, establishing assumptions governing the work, effectiveness of planning, adequacy of treatment, accuracy of interpretations, and significance of findings.

As at the GS-12 grade level, the appellant independently organizes the work to accomplish the objectives of the assignment, recognizes the limitation of current approaches, suggests further work that may be required, determines the value criteria, and recognizes and deals with problems and constraints uncovered during the course of the project. Management provides the overall goal, the framework of the mission of the unit [acronym], and the conditions such as time and resource constraints and provides overall administrative oversight. As at the GS-12 grade level, the appellant is responsible for factual accuracy, the thoroughness of the analytic design, and the cogency of interpretations. She provides technical guidance to others in the work group; and has widespread contacts within the organization for the primary purposes of coordinating work efforts, reporting on results, and resolving problems. Typical of the GS-12 grade level, the appellant's completed work is reviewed for adequacy in meeting objectives established by management. However, the appellant's work exceeds GS-12 grade level responsibility in that it is not generally reviewed by her supervisor for the validity and soundness of approaches and conclusions. She is the sole operations research analyst in [acronym] and, as such, her work is accepted as authoritative by her supervisor within the areas of her expertise. However, it is subject to peer review by Forest Service professionals outside the appellant's work site prior to presentation at conferences or for publication.

In contrast, GS-13 grade level analysts are responsible for ascertaining the exact nature, ramifications, contextual limitations, and alternatives to be considered of a broadly stated or ill-structured problem, study, or project. Although the appellant has considerable latitude to determine techniques and methods to be used, she does not have the broad scope of responsibility envisioned at the GS-13 grade level. For example, her supervisor delimits the time, cost, geographical range, and scope of the study. As discussed previously, the studies she performs are not the broadly stated or ill structured problems that present GS-13 grade level planning and related responsibilities.

At the GS-13 grade level, assignments generally involve extensive contacts, the purpose of which is to summarize, interpret, and exchange information on difficult or misunderstood issues. The work requires tact and negotiating skills to defend the work results, negotiate with other groups and individuals holding differing viewpoints and goals, and establish working relationships with other organizations. The appellant's work does not generate results requiring the level of contacts, tact, diplomacy, and general persuasiveness envisioned at the GS-13 grade

level as her work is not generally disputed by others in the field. In addition, at the GS-13 grade level, analysts are responsible for more than the technical aspects of the study. They have the additional responsibility for findings that are significant and effectively presented. Although many of the appellant's findings are judged through peer review to be sufficiently significant to warrant presentation in appropriate professional venues, the responsibility for directing research efforts into such areas as would produce the level of significant findings envisioned at the GS-13 grade level resides with the appellant's supervisor. In addition to guiding his staff into those areas of research likely to yield the significant results desired by management, the appellant's supervisor is responsible for determining the manner, place, and time for presenting those significant findings in order to maximize their effectiveness. GS-13 analysts have more independence to change the directions of projects than does the appellant, who must obtain the approval of her supervisor for significant changes.

Although the appellant's completed work is not reviewed by her supervisor, whose expertise is in a different area than the appellant's, it is peer reviewed prior to publication and before presentation at conferences. Thus, the level of technical review of the appellant's work somewhat exceeds the GS-12 grade level. However, it is a basic principle of classification that a position must meet the full intent of a factor level before that level can be credited. While limited aspects of the appellant's level of responsibility exceed the GS-12 grade level, her work fails to fully meet the GS-13 grade level. Accordingly, this factor is credited properly at the GS-12 grade level.

### **Decision**

The position is classified properly as Operations Research Analyst, GS-1515-12.