

**FIVE-LEVEL PERFORMANCE APPRAISAL PROGRAM**

**1. PURPOSE**

This Directive establishes a 5-level performance appraisal program for the employees of certain covered programs of the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS). In this appraisal program, three performance levels are used to rate individual performance elements, and five summary levels (Office of Personnel Management (OPM) summary level pattern H) are used to rate overall performance.

This appraisal program has been approved by the Department's Office of Human Resources Management.

**2. AUTHORITIES**

This 5-level appraisal program is authorized by, and meets the requirements of:

- a. Title 5, United States Code, Chapter 43.
- b. Title 5, Code of Federal Regulations (CFR), Part 430.
- c. U. S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Performance Management System, as approved by the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) on January 31, 1996, and the Secretary of Agriculture on June 12, 1996.

**3. COVERAGE, EFFECTIVE DATE, AND MINIMUM APPRAISAL PERIOD**

- d. Coverage. This 5-level performance appraisal program applies to APHIS employees in the following programs, except those excluded by law, regulation, or an administrative determination by OPM:
  - (1) Office of the Administrator.
  - (2) Policy and Program Development.

All permanent full-time and part-time GS, GM, and wage system employees are covered. The primary exclusions are excepted service employees (Schedules A, B, and C) who are not expected to work for at least 120 days in a 12-month period, Foreign Service personnel (pay plans FP and FE), and members of the Senior Executive Service.

- b. Effective Date. This performance appraisal program is effective for the annual rating cycle beginning October 1, 2001.
- c. Minimum Appraisal Period. The minimum appraisal period is 90 calendar days. An employee may not be given a rating of record unless he/she has worked under a written performance plan for at least 90 days.

#### 4. GLOSSARY

Terms in **bold** are defined in OPM regulations, 5 CFR, Part 430 (2001).

- a. Advisory rating. A performance rating that covers part of the appraisal period, such as for a detail or temporary promotion that lasts at least 90 days. An advisory rating is not, in itself, a rating of record, but is considered by the rating official when the rating of record is prepared.
- b. **Appraisal.** The process under which an employee's performance is reviewed and evaluated.
- c. **Appraisal period.** The established period of time, normally 12 months, for which an employee's performance will be reviewed and for which a final rating of record will be prepared.
- d. Appraisal program. The specific requirements and procedures established under the policies and parameters of the Department's appraisal system.
- e. **Appraisal system.** The Department's OPM-approved framework of umbrella policies and parameters established for the administration of performance appraisal programs in USDA.
- f. Appraisal units. The weighted value assigned to each critical and noncritical element in the performance plan. Each critical performance element will be assigned a weight of 2 appraisal units. If non-critical elements are used, each will be assigned a weight of 1 appraisal unit.
- g. **Critical element.** A work assignment or responsibility of such importance that unacceptable performance on the element would result in a determination that an employee's overall performance is unacceptable.

- h. Element rating. The level of performance on each individual element determined by comparing accomplishments to the performance standard.
- i. Inability to rate. The situation that occurs when a rating of record is due, but the employee has not had the opportunity to perform under a performance plan for at least 90 days, the minimum rating period.
- j. Minimum rating period. The minimum period of performance (90 days) under a properly signed and approved performance plan that must be completed before a performance rating may be prepared.
- k. Noncritical element. A dimension or aspect of individual, team, or organizational performance, exclusive of a critical element, that is used in assigning a summary level. Such elements may include, but are not limited to, objectives, goals, program plans, work plans, and other means of expressing expected performance. The use of noncritical elements is optional.
- l. Performance. Accomplishment of work assignments or responsibilities.
- m. **Performance plan**. All of the written performance elements and standards that set forth expected performance. A plan must include all critical elements and non-critical elements (if non-critical elements are used) and their performance standards.
- n. **Performance standard**. The management-approved expression of the performance thresholds, requirements, results, or expectations that must be met to be appraised at a particular level of performance. A performance standard may include, but is not limited to, indicators of quality, quantity, timeliness, and manner of performance.
- o. Progress review. Communication between the supervisor and employee about performance compared to the performance standards.
- p. Rating official. The individual who is responsible for informing the employee of the performance elements of his/her position, establishing performance standards for those elements, evaluating performance and assigning the performance rating. The rating official generally is the first level supervisor or a team leader.
- q. **Rating of record**. The performance rating and assignment of a summary rating level prepared either at the end of an appraisal period for performance of duties over the entire period and the assignment of a summary rating level, OR, when needed to make the rating of record consistent with a determination to grant or withhold a within-grade increase.

- r. Reviewing official. The higher level official who must concur with the rating official's determination that an employee's performance is "unacceptable," before the "unacceptable" rating is issued to the employee.
- s. Summary level. The adjective indicator that equates to the overall level of performance based on the appraisal of each performance element.

## 5. POLICY

- a. It is APHIS policy to operate a performance appraisal program in a manner which is consistent with applicable statutes, regulations, and the principles and objectives of the USDA system.
- b. The Administrator and delegated managers may initiate new performance appraisal programs, changes in program coverage, and changes to the specific procedures and requirements of this performance appraisal program for their organizations, within the parameters of the USDA system. These include:
  - (1) The starting and ending dates of the annual appraisal cycle,
  - (2) The minimum rating period,
  - (3) How many and which performance levels will be used to appraise performance elements,
  - (4) The summary level pattern, and
  - (5) The method for deriving and assigning the summary level for the rating of record.

**Departmental approval is required before new programs, changes in program coverage, or changes in items (2) through (5) above, can be implemented.**

- c. The success of performance appraisal programs will be measured by the extent to which they:
  - (1) Support the Department's missions and customer service philosophy;
  - (2) Support and adhere to the Department's civil rights and diversity policies, recognize civil rights and diversity accomplishments, and improve management of a diverse workforce;
  - (3) Align individual and team performance expectations with organizational strategic plans, including performance goals and objectives;

- (4) Provide for employee performance evaluation which focuses on results and objective measures of performance;
  - (5) Provide for employee involvement in the performance appraisal process;
  - (6) Use the appraisal process as a tool to improve continuous two-way communication of organizational, team, and employee performance objectives and accomplishments;
  - (7) Improve organizational, team, and individual performance;
  - (8) Reward organizational, team, and individual performance through traditional and innovative uses of recognition;
  - (9) Promote the use of streamlining techniques such as automation and paperwork reduction to make the performance appraisal process more efficient.
- d. The provisions of this performance appraisal program will be communicated to all covered employees through discussions between supervisors and employees, training, and/or orientation and informational materials, when appropriate.

## 6. RESPONSIBILITIES

- a. Employees will:
- (1) Participate with the rating official in developing elements and standards for the annual performance plan;
  - (2) Ensure they have a clear understanding of their performance expectations, and request clarification, as necessary;
  - (3) Manage performance to achieve identified goals and expected results;
  - (4) Seek frequent feedback from the rating official;
  - (5) Take steps to improve aspects of performance that are identified as not meeting expectations or otherwise needing improvement.
- b. Rating officials (first-line supervisors or other officials with authority to issue performance plans and assign ratings of record) will:
- (1) Develop performance elements and standards, with employee input, and document them in the written annual performance plan;

- (2) Monitor employee performance during the appraisal period and communicate with employees regularly about their performance;
  - (3) Conduct at least one mid-term performance progress review with each employee;
  - (4) Assist employees in improving performance, and work more closely with any employee whose performance is identified as not meeting expectations or otherwise needing improvement;
  - (5) Appraise each employee's performance at the end of the appraisal cycle (or at other times when a rating of record is required), conduct an end-of-year performance review, and issue the annual rating of record;
  - (6) Take appropriate action for employees whose performance does not meet expectations; and recognize employees, as appropriate, for successful performance;
  - (7) Forward a copy of ratings of record, through administrative channels as appropriate, to the servicing personnel office for entry in the National Finance Center's personnel database.
- c. The designated reviewing official will review and approve the rating of record for each employee whose performance is rated unacceptable.
- d. The Director, MRP Human Resources Division, will:
- (1) Design performance appraisal programs at the direction of the Administrator;
  - (2) Obtain Departmental approval, when required by Departmental policy, for new performance appraisal programs and for changes in program procedures, requirements, or coverage;
  - (3) Make informational materials and operating guidance available to supervisors and employees; and
  - (4) Periodically evaluate the effectiveness of performance appraisal programs.

## 8. REQUIREMENTS

- a. Annual Appraisal Period. In most cases, the appraisal cycle will cover a 12-month period, and each employee will receive an annual rating of record at the end of the cycle. **The rating cycle is the fiscal year, from October 1 through September 30.**

b. Establishing Performance Plans. A written performance plan will be provided to each covered employee at the beginning of each appraisal period (normally within 30 days). The performance plan includes the dates of the appraisal period, and performance elements and standards. Performance plans are recorded on forms AD-435A and B, Performance Plan, Progress Review and Appraisal Worksheet, and Continuation Sheet.

(1) Performance Elements.

(a) Each performance plan will include at least one critical element based on the employee's work assignments and responsibilities. If appropriate, individual contributions to team or unit performance may be covered.

(b) A performance plan may include one or more noncritical elements, but this is not a requirement.

(c) Appraisal Units--Weighting of Elements. Each element in the performance plan will be assigned a weighted value to communicate its relative importance in determining the overall summary rating. Each critical element will be assigned a value of 2 appraisal units. If any non-critical elements are used, each will be assigned a value of 1 appraisal unit.

(d) Equal Opportunity/Civil Rights Content. As required by Departmental policy, all supervisors will have a separate critical element on equal opportunity/civil rights. For nonsupervisory employees, performance expectations for civil rights will be included in a critical performance element, but it need not be a stand-alone element.

(2) Performance Standards. Performance in each element is rated at one of three levels, "fully successful," "exceeds fully successful," or "unacceptable." For each element, the performance standard must be written at the "fully successful" level.

In addition, one or more performance standards also may be written at the "exceeds fully successful" level and/or the "does not meet fully successful" level, but this is not a requirement. The absence of a written standard at the "exceeds fully successful" level or the "does not meet fully successful" level will not preclude the assignment of an element rating at those levels.

(a) The "fully successful" level generally describes the performance of a solid, effective employee whose work meets, or somewhat exceeds, normal expectations in terms of quantity, quality, timeliness, and customer service. Some indicators of performance at this level are:

- 1 The employee almost always completes work on schedule and demonstrates a sound balance between quality and quantity.
  - 2 The employee prioritizes assignments, works efficiently, and requires only normal supervision and followup.
  - 3 Work products consistently meet applicable instructions, specifications, and goals, and meet customer needs. Errors are minimal and seldom repeated.
- (b) The “exceeds fully successful” level is described as performance in an element which, overall, significantly exceeds the performance standards at the “fully successful” level. Some indicators of performance at this level are:
- 1 The employee is frequently sought out by others based on a high degree of demonstrated knowledge.
  - 2 The employee takes initiative in identifying challenging work goals and in mapping out solutions to achieve maximum results.
  - 3 The quantity and/or quality of work product is consistently and significantly beyond normal requirements.
- (c) The “does not meet fully successful” level is described as performance which fails to meet the performance standards at the “fully successful” level.
- (3) Employees are encouraged to participate in the development of performance elements and standards, to review them at least annually, and to make suggestions for changes.
- (4) Changes to Performance Plans. A new or revised performance plan will be issued, as necessary, if an employee is assigned to a different position, or if his/her major duties or responsibilities change during the appraisal period. This includes temporary changes in duties due to a detail or temporary promotion, if the temporary assignment is expected to last as long as 90 days. Changes to performance plans must be communicated in writing to the employee.



c. Monitoring Performance.

(1) Progress Reviews. During the appraisal period, at least one mid-term progress review will be conducted with each employee to discuss his/her performance compared to the performance plan.

(2) Unacceptable Performance.

(a) Performance Improvement Plan. If, at any time during the appraisal cycle, an employee's performance is determined to be "unacceptable" in one or more critical elements, the employee will be given a written performance improvement plan and an opportunity to demonstrate "fully successful" performance. The performance improvement plan will include:

- 1 Notice to the employee that his/her performance is unacceptable;
- 2 The element(s) in which performance is unacceptable;
- 3 What the employee must do to demonstrate acceptable performance;
- 4 The specific assistance that will be provided to help the employee;
- 5 The timeframe of the performance improvement period; and
- 6 The actions that may be initiated if the performance does not improve to the fully successful level.

The servicing Employee Relations Specialist should be consulted for assistance in developing the performance improvement plan.

(b) Failure to Demonstrate Fully Successful Performance. If the employee has not improved performance to the acceptable level during the opportunity period, action will be initiated to reassign, reduce in grade, or remove the employee.

(c) Savings Provision. Administrative actions initiated against employees whose performance is "unacceptable" under 5 U.S.C. 4303 and an approved Agency performance appraisal system in effect prior to the effective date of this program will continue to be processed consistent with that preestablished set of procedures and requirements.

d. Rating Performance.

- (1) Eligibility for Rating. To be eligible for a rating of record, an employee must have worked under a performance plan for at least the 90-day minimum rating period. If necessary, the appraisal period will be extended until the minimum rating period has been met before a rating of record is issued.
- (2) Rating of Record.
  - (a) A written rating of record will be issued to each employee as soon as practicable after the end of the appraisal period, normally within 30 days. The rating of record consists of ratings for each element in the performance plan, and the assignment of a summary rating level. Ratings of record are recorded on form AD-435, Performance Appraisal.
  - (b) Assignment of Element Ratings. The rating official will appraise the employee's performance against the performance standards for each element, and rate each element as "exceeds fully successful," "fully successful," or "does not meet fully successful." The number of appraisal units assigned to each element in the performance plan is entered in the appropriate element rating block (15B, 15C, or 15D) of the rating form.
  - (c) Derivation and Assignment of Summary Rating Level. Element ratings will be converted into one of five summary rating levels, as follows:
    - 1 Unacceptable (OPM rating level 1). If any critical element is rated "does not meet fully successful," the summary rating level is "unacceptable."
    - 2 Marginal (OPM rating level 2). All critical elements are rated at least "meets fully successful," but the total number of appraisal units rated "does not meet fully successful" is greater than the number of appraisal units which are rated "exceeds fully successful."
    - 3 Fully Successful (OPM rating level 3). All critical elements are rated at least "meets fully successful," with any combination of appraisal units that falls between "Marginal" and "Superior."
    - 4 Superior (OPM rating level 4). All elements are rated at least "meets fully successful," and more appraisal units are

rated at "exceeds fully successful" than are rated at "meets fully successful."

5 Outstanding (OPM rating level 5). If all performance elements (and appraisal units) are rated "exceeds fully successful," the summary rating level is "outstanding."

- (d) If a summary rating of "outstanding" is assigned, the rating official will prepare a brief narrative describing specific instances of performance accomplishments for each element to justify each "exceeds fully successful" element rating.
- (e) If an element is rated "does not meet fully successful," the rating official must prepare a written statement describing the employee's deficiencies in the element compared to the "fully successful" standard. An "unacceptable" rating of record must be reviewed and signed by a higher level official before it is issued to the employee.
- (f) Consistency with Within-Grade Increase (WGI) Determinations. An employee must have a rating of record of "fully successful" to be granted a WGI. The rating of record must be "unacceptable" or "marginal" if the WGI is to be denied. When a decision to grant or withhold a WGI is inconsistent with the employee's most recent rating of record, a more current rating of record must be prepared and issued.

e. Advisory Ratings.

An employee may receive one or more advisory ratings during an appraisal cycle. Any advisory ratings received by an employee will be considered by the rating official when preparing a rating of record. An advisory rating is not, in itself, a rating of record.

- (1) Details and Temporary Promotions. An advisory rating will be prepared for any detail or temporary promotion which lasts as long as 90 calendar days. The supervisor will document the employee's accomplishments and forward the information to the employee's permanent rating official.
- (2) Change of Position. If an employee has worked under a performance plan for at least 90 calendar days, and then moves to a position with a different rating official, the losing rating official will prepare an advisory rating and forward it to the new rating official.

## 9. RECORDS AND RETENTION

- b. Employee Performance File. Official ratings of record and supporting materials (the annual performance plan and records of accomplishments) are retained in the Employee Performance File for 4 years.
- b. National Finance Center (NFC) Personnel Database. Rating of records must be forwarded to the servicing personnel office so that the summary rating of record can be entered into the NFC database and reported to OPM through the Civilian Personnel Data File.

## 10. PERFORMANCE BONUSES

Performance bonuses include the lump-sum cash performance award and the Quality Step Increase (QSI), which are intended to recognize and reward good performance throughout the rating cycle.

- a. Lump-Sum Performance Bonuses. To be eligible for a performance bonus under this 5-level performance appraisal program, an employee must receive at least a “fully successful” rating of record. A written justification is required to support a lump-sum performance award over \$500, unless the rating of record is “outstanding,” in which case the narrative supporting the “outstanding” rating (as required by section 8.d.(2)(d) above) is sufficient.
- b. QSIs. To be eligible for a QSI, an employee must receive an “outstanding” rating of record. No further justification beyond the narrative which supports the “outstanding” rating is needed.

## 11. INQUIRIES

- a. Inquiries on policy determinations, new performance appraisal programs, and changes in program procedures or coverage, and development or revision of performance plans should be referred to MRP Human Resources Division, Program Development.
- b. Inquiries on dealing with poor performance should be directed to the servicing Employee Relations Specialist.
- c. This Directive is available on the MRPHR homepage at [www.aphis.usda.gov/mb/mrphr](http://www.aphis.usda.gov/mb/mrphr) and the Employee Library at [www.aphis.usda.gov/library](http://www.aphis.usda.gov/library).

/s/

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