



NEW EMPLOYEE GUIDE

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Table of Contents

Overview of USDA.....	4
Overview of Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).....	4
Conservation Careers	4
Types of Appointments.....	5
Probationary Period	5
Policies and Regulations	5
Ethics and Personal Conduct.....	5
Political Activities.....	6
Government Property and Supplies	6
Computers and Telecommunications.....	6
Dress Code	7
Telephone Tips.....	7
Office Mail.....	7
Office Closures	7
Drug-Free Workplace Policy	8
Smoking Policy	8
Pay and Leave.....	8
Submitting Time and Attendance (T&A) Sheets	8
Pay Schedules	9
Overtime	9
Within-Grade Increases/Wage Rate Increases	9
Work Schedules	9
Credit Hours.....	9
Excused Absence	10
Time off for voting.....	10
Compensatory Time Off	11
Witness Service.....	10
Voluntary Emergency Services.....	10
Participation in Non-Federal Organizations	11
Change of Official Duty Station	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Adjustment of Work Schedules for Religious Observances	11
Court Leave.....	10
Annual Leave	11
Sick Leave.....	11
Military Leave.....	12
Holidays	12
Voluntary Leave Transfer Program	12
Travel and Transportation.....	12
Travel	12
Travel Expenses and Authorization	12
Government Travel Credit Card	12
Use of Motor Vehicles	12
Government owned vehicles (GOV).....	12
Information Technology Security	13
Personal Responsibility.....	13

Magic Ticket	13
Background Investigations.....	13
Benefits	13
Insurance Programs.....	13
Employee Assistance Program (EAP)	15
Transit Benefit Program.....	15
Retirement.....	15
Automated Systems	17
WebTCAS (Web-based Total Cost Accounting System) & Timekeeping.....	17
EmpowHR/Human Resources Information System (HRIS) (formerly ICAMS or CAMS).....	17
eAuthentication.....	17
AgLearn	17
NFC Employee Personal Page	17
My NRCS	17
eOPF	18
Career Management	18
Position Classification	18
Position Description.....	18
Performance Standards	18
NRCS Mentoring Program	19
Telework	19
Promotions and Transfers	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Merit Promotion.....	19
Awards	20
Job Protections	20
Anti-Discrimination Laws	20
Appeal Rights.....	20
Civil Rights and Equal Employment Opportunity.....	20
Grievances/Alternative Dispute Resolution.....	20
Reasonable Accommodations	20
The Privacy Act of 1974.....	21
The Freedom of Information Act (FOIA).....	21
Safety and Health.....	21
Accident Reporting and Worker’s Compensation	21
A Message from Human Resources.....	22

Overview of USDA

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) serves all Americans daily. The Department's mission is to improve and maintain farm income, to assure consumers safe and adequate food supplies at reasonable prices, and to develop and expand markets for projects abroad. It works to enhance the environment and to maintain production capacity by helping landowners protect the soil, water, forests, and other natural resources. Rural development, credit, and conservation programs are key resources for carrying out National growth policies. Other research covers such areas as animal disease and pest control, crop production, and the marketing and use of agricultural products.

In the Department's early years, the vast majority of Americans lived on farms, and farmers produced only enough food to supply themselves and few other people. Today, although less than 3 percent of the population resides on farmland, farm workers produce enough for this country – as well as for a growing export market. Agriculture is, in fact, this Nation's largest industry and its largest employer – approximately 21 million people work in some phase of agriculture – from growing food and fiber to selling it in the supermarket. Americans enjoy better diets because of USDA's nutrition research, education efforts, and food assistance programs.

USDA research findings, directly or indirectly, benefit all Americans. The Department's thorough inspection and grading services safeguard and assure standards of quality in the daily food supply.

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, 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 soil and water conservation districts 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 career opportunities for folks who are still in college and for those who have already graduated. Here is an overview of some of those opportunities.

Soil Conservationist – Most of their time is in the field working with farmers, ranchers, and other land users. Soil Conservationists offer conservation planning and technical help to everyone from family farmers to local government officials. Conservationists suggest ways to help 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, ranchers, and other landowners. 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.

Biologist – spend most of their time in the field working with private landowners, other agencies, and units of government. They provide technical support on 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 and water supply systems; 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.

□ **Engineering Technician** – is involved in planning, design, and construction work. Assists the Engineer with surveying the land, plotting notes, and laying out construction measures, gathers data, makes computations, and prepares maps and cross sections of profiles. They may also serve as a construction inspector on a wide variety of projects.

□ **Other Careers in NRCS** – Accounting; Agricultural Economics; Agronomy; Aquatic Biology; Business Administration; Cartography, Communications, contracting, Forestry; Geology; Human Resources; Hydrology; Plant Sciences; Rural Sociology; Watershed Management; Wetland Science, and Wildlife Biology.

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 on this form 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 substantially continuous years of service, you can convert to a career appointment. This is the most permanent of all appointments within the Federal Service. This appointment provides you with greater employment and job retention rights.

□ **Excepted-Service Appointment**– Certain positions are “excepted” from the normal requirements of competitive service by law, executive order, or Office of Personnel Management regulations. Many excepted appointments have a time limitation (180 days – two years). 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.

Probationary Period

If you are a new employee on a career or career-conditional appointment, you must serve a one-year probationary period. Employees on an excepted-service appointment may be subject to a one or two year trial period depending on the legal authority under which the new employee is appointed. The trial period is the last and most important step in the hiring process. It is intended to give the Agency an opportunity for on-the-job assessment of your overall fitness and qualifications for continual employment and to permit the removal of an employee whose performance or conduct does not meet acceptable standards. If your performance or conduct is deficient during the probationary period, you may be removed from Federal service.

Policies and Regulations

It will be beneficial for you to read and understand the regulations and policies that affect your work, your conduct as an employee and agency procedures. Each Federal Agency publishes regulations, policies, and procedures to supplement those provided by USDA or provide information on matters that pertain only to the Agency. Information pertinent to employees is contained in directives, manuals, circulars, and instructions. Your Human Resources staff can assist you with this information.

It is your duty 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.

Ethics and Personal Conduct

As a federal employee you are held to standards of ethical behavior representative of a public servant. These ethical standards are outlined in Executive Order 12674 and modified by Executive Order 12731. There are two core concepts underlying the ethical standards of these Executive Orders: 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. You will receive copies of:

- Self-Certification of Accomplished Ethics Orientation Brief
- The Standards of Ethical Conduct for Employees of the Executive Branch (Including the Principals of Ethical Conduct, section 2635.101—2635.107)
- Supplemental Standards of Ethical Conduct for Employees of the Department of Agriculture
- Employee Responsibilities and Conduct OHRM Personnel Bulletin 735-1

Your supervisor will allow you official time to review the ethics regulations. If you have any questions about which of the rules applies to you in your current position, or any other questions, please discuss them with your supervisor and/or the State Administrative Officer. The NRCS Ethics website is <http://www.nrcs.usa.gov/intranet/ethics>.

Political Activities

Under the Hatch Act, Federal employees face restrictions on their ability to participate in political activities. Generally speaking:

Federal employees 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.

Federal Employees may not:

- use official authority or influence to interfere with an election or legislation;
- 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.

Government Property and Supplies

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; automated data processes capabilities, printing and reproduction facilities, Government records, and Government vehicles.

Computers and Telecommunications

USDA policy provides for limited personal use of Government computer and 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 computer/telecommunications resources shall take place during the employee's personal time, not during business hours. Use of the Federal telephone system for personal long-distance calls is not allowed.

While the occasional use of telecommunications resources in moderation is acceptable, uses not consistent with the USDA 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 of race, creed, religion, color, sex, handicap, national origin, or sexual orientation. Questions concerning appropriate use of Government property, including telecommunications equipment, should be addressed to your supervisor.

Dress Code

NRCS generally has an office dress code policy that is professional business casual. However, you should and are responsible to dress properly for the occasion. Your office, work environment and supervisor 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. Your dress style will project a positive or negative image about “you”. You broadcast a message in what you wear. We suggest you make an accurate statement in your appearance and transmit a positive, professional image at all times. 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 provide good customer service. Listed below are tips for a successful telephone conversation –

- Check voice mail frequently throughout the day.
- Maintain an up to date and accurate message at all times.
- Answer your phone personally whenever possible.
- 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 a positive stroke.
- 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

Outgoing correspondence are mailed using official postage- and a 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.

Office Closures

In some situations, conditions will be of sufficient magnitude to cause hazardous conditions which could be dangerous to the safety of employees at a specific office. The condition must be general rather than personal in scope of impact and sufficient to prevent most employees from reaching work safely. Office closing or delayed opening will be communicated to employees through an established telephone notification system. In the hazardous conditions case, the following policy will apply in New York:

If the office opening is delayed, it should be delayed to a certain time, e.g. 10:00 a.m., rather than a “2-hour delay.” All employees who report to work will be granted administrative leave from the beginning of their regularly scheduled tour of duty until the determined opening time. Excess time should be charged to employee’s leave. Employees who do not work at all on a delayed start day will be charged leave for the entire day.

Employees who choose not to report to work due to the hazardous weather conditions will be charged annual leave for the entire workday. This is consistent with NRCS policy found in General Manual 360, Part 415.2N (3)-(8), May 2003.

If an early dismissal decision is made, the early dismissal will be at a certain time, e.g. 3:00 p.m. All employees on duty at the scheduled dismissal time should leave the office and will be granted administrative leave until the end of their regularly scheduled tour of duty.

When an early dismissal decision is made, employees may be approved leave, as requested, between the notice of dismissal and the actual dismissal. They are not to be charged leave from the time of actual dismissal to the end of the workday. However, if the employee chooses to leave the office prior to the notice of the dismissal they will be charged the entire time as leave.

If the employee is on scheduled leave and the office is closed the entire day for hazardous conditions; the employee is not entitled to administrative leave.

In order to accommodate those who have concerns about winter driving conditions when the office is functioning on a regular schedule, a flexible leave policy is established which will allow individuals to adjust their arrival or departure time. This type of leave is charged to annual leave. Employees should continue to notify their supervisors if they plan to arrive beyond 30 minutes of their scheduled work arrival time.

If an employee chooses to work, he or she cannot be granted additional time off in lieu of the hazardous weather time.

Telecommuting employees are not excused from working their regular duty hours on a "snow closing day". See General Manual 360-429.26 for detailed information on telecommuting and Group Dismissal.

If an employee's area of residence is affected, the employee may be excused without charge to leave, with approval from the State Conservationist, if all of the following apply:

- a. Weather conditions in the area of an employee's residence are publicly declared extremely hazardous by an appropriate State or local authority and driving has been limited;
- b. The employee is unable to report to duty and was not on scheduled leave.

Drug-Free Workplace Policy

The Natural Resources Conservation Service, in light of its responsibility to protect the natural resources of this country, has a compelling obligation to eliminate illegal drug use from its workplace. The use of illegal drugs by employees can impair the ability of those employees to perform tasks that are critical to carrying out the NRCS mission. Use of illegal drugs can also result in increasing the potential for accidents and other failures that pose a serious threat to health and safety.

It is the policy of the Natural Resources Conservation Service that the unlawful manufacture, distribution, dispensation, possession or use of any controlled substance is expressly prohibited on workplace premises, or in connection with the performance of any employee's duties. In order to remain in the employ of the Federal government, any individual who violates this drug abuse policy will be required to seek professional drug abuse counseling from an approved rehabilitation program, in addition to any legal action which may be

forthcoming. Individuals who refuse such counseling, or are convicted of a second offense, will be subject to disciplinary action.

The executive order under Section 503 of the Supplemental Appropriations Act of 1987 establishes uniformity among Federal agency drug testing plans and confidentiality of drug testing results.

The NRCS plan includes the following types of drug testing:

- Random testing of employees in testing-designated positions.
- Reasonable suspicion testing.
- Applicant testing.
- Injury, illness, unsafe or unhealthful practice testing.
- Voluntary testing.
- Testing as part of or as a follow-up to counseling or rehabilitation.
- General Manual Title 360 part 420.180 and Department Personnel Manual Supplement 792-3 (Drug Free Workplace) should be consulted for further guidance concerning the Drug Free Workplace Program.

Smoking Policy

Smoking is restricted in all federal offices and vehicles. Smoking is allowed in designated areas only

Pay and Leave

Submitting Time and Attendance (T&A) Sheets

NRCS uses a web-based timekeeping report system called WebTCAS as our official Time and Attendance (T&A) system. Employees are assigned to an official timekeeper who can assist in the processing of your bi-weekly timesheet. Your supervisor monitors, coordinates and certifies your reported work times. You will have access to WebTCAS within the first few weeks of employment.

Each pay period you will electronically update and transmit your T&A to a Timekeeper and your supervisor who will certify and 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 are responsible to report your times accurately and confirm entries. Fraudulent or fictitious timesheet submission will result in release from employment.

Pay Schedules

NRCS uses the general schedule (GS) salary system for white-collar federal employees commonly known as the “civil service pay system”. The GS system consists of 15 grades, each of which has 10 steps. Entry-level hiring into a grade is normally at step 1, although various new personnel flexibility’s allow hiring at different steps. The grade level of an initial hire depends largely on the occupation, as does the career progression up through the grades.

NRCS federal employees receive biweekly pays. Your annual pay rate includes 26 pay periods of 80 hours, total of 2080 hours for the year. Please note that posted pay charts reflect annual pay at 2087 hours for the year. You will receive a salary check (direct deposited) every two weeks on designated paydays.

Pay is locality based. For GS employees, there are 30 or so metropolitan locations with special locality pay tables and a catchall “Rest of the U.S.” locality pay table for everywhere else within the contiguous 48 states. Annual raises are set by local labor market conditions and subject to the availability of funds appropriated by Congress.

Overtime

The federal government complies with the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA), which provides for minimum standards for both wages and overtime entitlement, and spells out administrative procedures. Under the law, approved overtime equals 1-1 /2 times the rate of basic pay for work exceeding 8 hours a day or 40 hours a week for non-exempt FLSA employees.

Within-Grade Increases/Wage Rate Increases

General Schedule employees are eligible for within-grade increases, unless 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

156 weeks for advancement to steps 8-10

A “quality step increase” is available under the Agency’s performance incentive programs.

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. The core hours in

NRCS are 9:00 a.m.-3:00 p.m. During the core hours, all employees must be at work. There is a mandatory 30 minute, non-paid lunch period approximately half-way through the day. Employees may expand their lunch period from 30 minutes up to 1 hour (non-paid) within the established lunch band, (11:00 a.m. – 2:00 p.m.) with supervisory approval. If you work more than 6 hours in a day you must take a lunch break within the established lunch band.

NRCS generally participates in a “Flexitour Work Schedule”. The “Flexitour” offers an employee a flexible starting time of up to 30 minutes. When an employee varies their starting time up to 30 minutes after their designated starting time, the employee must make up this time at the end of the day or take approved leave. Employees are responsible for choosing a biweekly schedule within the flexible work schedule, 6:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. and submitting it in writing to the supervisor for approval. Your supervisor must approve your work schedule. Employees must complete their scheduled number of hours by 6:00 p.m. Employees must be present during the core hours (unless otherwise approved) or must be approved for leave during the portion of the core hours they are absent. For more information on alternate work schedules, refer to the General Manual. Check with your supervisor to see if these alternate work schedules apply to your office.

Credit Hours

Credit hours are those hours worked in excess of the basic work requirement, at an eligible employee’s election, with supervisory approval, to complete pending workload items.

Employees may only earn up to a maximum of two credit hours in a workday. Employees on a traditional work schedule, fixed compressed work schedule (5-4/9 or 4-10) and members of the Senior Executive Service may not accumulate credit hours. Full-time employees may not carry more than 24 credit hours from one pay period to another. Credit hours in excess of 24 hours at the end of a pay period are lost.

Part-time employees may accumulate credit hours on a pro rata basis upon completion of their regularly scheduled hours of duty for the day (if on a “flexitour” schedule only). Employees may not carry more than ¼ of the hours equal to his or her biweekly work requirement from one pay period to another. For example, a part-time employee scheduled to work 64 hours per pay period could carry a maximum of 16

hours ($1/4 \times 64 = 16$).

Credit hours may be earned in increments of 15 minutes.

- On scheduled workdays between the hours of 6:00 am to 6:00 pm.
- Before 6:00 am and after 6:00 pm to voluntarily attend night meetings, work on projects.

The first-line supervisor has the authority to approve or deny an employee's request to take credit hours based on the same criteria as annual leave, i.e., workload and work requirements. Approval or denial of leave (and the basis if denied) must be communicated to the employee in a timely manner.

Excused Absence

Excused absence, sometimes referred to as administrative leave, is an absence from duty, administratively authorized, without loss of pay and without charge to leave. Granting excused absences are authorized in limited circumstances for the benefit of the Agency's mission or a government-wide or Agency-recognized and sanctioned purpose. Some types of excused absences may include, but are not limited to:

Time off for voting:

In locations where the polls are not open at least three hours before or after an employee's regular work hours, a limited amount of excused absence may be granted to permit the employee to report to work up to three hours after the polls open or leave work up to three hours before the polls close, whichever requires the lesser amount of time off. In addition, if an employee's voting location is beyond normal commuting distance from his/her duty station and absentee ballot voting is not permitted, the employee may be granted sufficient time off (not to exceed one day) in order to make the trip to the voting location to cast a ballot. If more than one day is needed, the employee may request annual leave for the additional period of absence. An employee's "regular work hours" are to be determined by reference to the time of day the employee normally arrives at and departs from work.

Court Leave

Court leave is the authorized absence of an employee from work, without charge to leave or loss of pay, for jury duty or for attending judicial proceedings in a non-official capacity as a witness on behalf of either party, as long as one of the parties is a Federal, State, or local government. If you receive a jury duty notice,

you must send a copy to your Timekeeper. You will annotate the use of Court Leave on your timesheet.

All full-time and part-time, leave-earning employees are eligible if their services are required during their regularly scheduled tours of duty. For example, if a part-time employee is not scheduled to work on Mondays and he or she is summoned for jury duty that day, the employee is not entitled to court leave for that day. Employees must report for duty when excused from jury duty for a day or substantial portion of a day.

If an employee is on annual leave when called for jury service, court leave should be substituted. An employee on leave without pay, although otherwise eligible, may not be granted court leave when called to jury duty.

Witness Service

Official capacity an employee called as a court witness to testify in an official capacity, no matter on whose behalf, is in an official duty status rather than on court leave. The employee must be paid government travel expenses as appropriate.

Nonofficial capacity an employee summoned as a witness to testify in a nonofficial capacity on behalf of either party, as long as one of the parties is Federal, State, or local government, is entitled to court leave during the time absent as a witness.

If the witness service is in a nonofficial capacity on behalf of a private party and the government is not one of the parties, the employee's absence must be charged to annual leave.

When court leave is granted, employees are allowed to keep fees paid for reimbursement of expenses but are not allowed to keep fees paid for jury/witness services.

Voluntary Emergency Services

Time off without loss of pay or charge to other leave may be given to employees who serve as volunteer firemen or perform other rescue or protective work during emergency situations. Conditions for granting leave for these emergencies are:

- a. Must be directly related to the Agency's mission,
- b. Employee must be a member of a voluntary rescue or protection organization, or be officially requested to participate in an emergency situation,
- c. Employee must actually participate in an emergency situation,
- d. Work in the office must not be adversely impacted

on a regular basis.

The amount of leave granted shall not exceed the duration of the emergency. The employee must provide the supervisor documentation reflecting his or her membership on any voluntary rescue or protective organization, prior to being allowed to use this leave. The first-line supervisor has the authority to limit or prohibit the use of leave if the employee's absence is adversely impacting the operation of the office. The supervisor should carefully review and approve or disapprove each request.

An employee must request excused absences in advance and in writing, when possible.

Adjustment of Work Schedules for Religious Observances

Employees may earn compensatory time for the purpose of taking time off without charge to leave when personal religious beliefs require that they abstain from work during certain periods of the workday or workweek. There are no restrictions on the "kind" of religious holiday or observance that an employee may observe. There is no relationship between overtime worked for this purpose and regular overtime worked under Code of Federal Regulations, Title 5 and the Fair Labor Standards Act.

Full-time and part-time employees are eligible to elect to work compensatory time or to take compensatory time off to meet their religious obligations.

Compensatory time for this purpose may be earned the pay period before the employee expects to take off. An employee must state, in writing, the date and time being requested to take off for religious observance, along with a proposal on when compensatory time will be earned. First-line supervisors may approve employee requests to work or take compensatory time off for religious observances. Supervisors are encouraged to accommodate such requests.

Annual Leave

Accrued annual leave can be used for whatever purposes you desire; most people use it for vacations and personal business. Supervisors must approve annual leave in advance. An employee accrues annual leave for each full pay period of employment. Annual leave is accrued based on 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 category or 13 days a year
- 3 years but less than 15 years - of service 6 hour category 20 days a year

- 15 years or more of service - 8 hour category 26 days a year

Part-Time Employees - (One hour of leave accrues 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

Employees can carry 30 days (240 hours) of unused annual leave from year to year. Any excess accrued leave left at the end of the leave year will be lost. We encourage you to use your annual leave throughout the year in order to avoid losing accrued leave above the 30-day limit.

Compensatory Time Off

Compensatory time off must be used before employee may be granted annual leave provided it will not result in the employee forfeiting accrued annual leave. Once an employee has taken compensatory time, he or she may not request overtime pay for the work. Compensatory time off must be used within 26 pay periods in which it was earned. An employee requesting to use compensatory time in excess of three consecutive workdays must obtain advanced authorization on an OPM 71, Request for Leave or Approved Absence.

Sick Leave

Sick leave may be used when you: receive medical, dental, or optical examination or treatment; are incapacitated by physical or mental illness, injury, pregnancy, or childbirth; would, because of exposure to a communicable disease, jeopardize the health of others by your presence on the job; or must be absent from work for adoption-related activities. In addition, you may use a limited amount of sick leave to 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 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 in pay status. There is no annual limit on sick leave.

There are many other forms of leave. Leave policies will be discussed with your supervisor during your first week or two of your employment.

Military Leave

Military leave is absence with full pay for certain types of active duty, active duty training, and inactive duty training. Inactive duty training is authorized training performed by members of a Reserve component not on active duty and performed in connection with the prescribed activities of the Reserve component. It consists of regularly scheduled unit training periods, additional training periods, and equivalent training.

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

Voluntary Leave Transfer Program

The Voluntary Leave Transfer Program (VLTP) or Leave Share allows Federal employees to voluntarily donate earned annual leave to another Federal employee with a medical emergency, which has exhausted his or her own leave. All individuals involved in the VLTP are responsible for protecting the confidentiality/privacy of the participants of the program. Employees are eligible to participate in the VLTP on a full-time basis as well as while working part of the time. Notices of approved leave share recipients are posted on the My NRCS website at <https://my.nrcs.usda.gov/default.aspx>

Travel and Transportation

Travel

You may be required to travel to attend training courses or to conduct official Government business. An employee on official travel is expected to exercise the same care in incurring expenses that a person would when traveling on personal business. All travel is to be coordinated with your supervisor to avoid overtime

compensation work periods (when possible) and high travel costs.

Travel Expenses and Authorization

All travel must be approved by your supervisor. If you are required to travel for official 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. You must request a travel authorization through GovTrip PRIOR to traveling.

Government Travel Credit Card

Employees are mandated to use their government-issued travel charge card to pay for reimbursable travel expenses. All permanent employees must participate in the government travel charge card program.

Every employee is provided detailed information about appropriate and inappropriate uses of the travel credit card, and signs an agreement to abide by the card's terms and conditions, before the card is issued.

Any 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.

Employees are encouraged to charge as many official travel expenses to the credit card as possible since this will help maximize the rebates paid to the government by the bank.

Use of Motor Vehicles

Most NRCS positions are incidental motor vehicle operators, because we must drive to meet with our clients in order to provide technical assistance. Your position description will specify whether you are an incidental motor vehicle operator – if you are, you 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. Each employee must complete a request for authorization to drive a government-owned vehicle, which is available from the HR Office.

Government owned vehicles (GOV) may be used by employees for official purposes only. Willful misuse of GOVs carries a mandatory minimum penalty of 30 days suspension without pay; misuse of GOVs

may be subject to further disciplinary action up to and including removal from duty.

technology specialist to assist you. The website is: <https://merlin.sc.egov.usda.gov/helpdesk/>

Information Technology Security

Personal Responsibility

IT Security is the personal responsibility of each computer user. The difference between a secure computer system and one that is vulnerable is how the users apply the security measures that are available. You will be required to take an annual web-based cyber security course. All new employees must complete a computer user security agreement. The following measures are your computer security responsibilities.

Never share your user ID or password with anyone else. Don't tape user IDs and passwords to desks, walls, or terminals, or write them down and store them in list finders, desk drawers, etc. Do not save a user ID and password on the hard drive of a notebook computer. Passwords should be a mix of letters, numbers and characters, and be at least eight characters. Avoid using any word found in the dictionary as a password. Never use personal information (names of family members, pets, etc.) for your password.

Either log-off or use a password protected screen saver when you are away from your desk even briefly. Log-off when you leave the office.

Do not open attachments to e-mail messages unless you are positive they could not contain a virus. Never use software or files obtained from the Internet before scanning them for viruses. Do not install software on government computers without first obtaining approval from your IT specialist. Scan any storage media that has been received from an outside source. Insure that the current version of approved virus scanning software is installed and activated on your computer, and use it.

Computer files on the server are automatically backed-up. Your IT specialist can advise you on the backup procedures you should use for any file that you save on your hard-drive. If these files must be manually backed up, do so frequently. Always keep backups of your files in a secure location.

Never use unlicensed software on your computer. It is illegal to make copies of copyrighted software.

Remedy Ticket for Computer Problems

If you have a computer problem and need assistance, you should make your request whenever possible through the Remedy Ticket program for an information

Background Investigations

Successful background investigations with Fingerprints are required for all employees who use government computers. You must complete investigation paperwork and fingerprint charts before you start employment. The National Agency Check with Inquiries (NACI) is the minimum background investigation for all applicable Federal employees, long term volunteers, and contractors. A few positions will require a higher level security investigation. This requirement is designated in the Homeland Security Presidential Directive (HSPD) 12.

Benefits

Insurance Programs

Health Insurance

The Federal Employees Health Benefits (FEHB) program's goal is to help protect you and eligible family members from the expenses of illness and accidents. 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 the carrier cannot cancel 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 (November). Although you have sixty days to enroll, it is best to elect proper FEHB promptly to secure insurance coverage.

You and the government share the cost of the FEHB program. On average, the government pays slightly more than 70 percent of the cost. You pay your share of the premium through a payroll pre-tax 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 26.

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 effective the first pay period in January of the following year. You can make open season changes by using the National Finance Center’s Employee Personal Page or through submitting the proper documentation through the Human Resource Office.

Coverage for Temporary employees

Temporary employees are eligible to enroll at own cost under 5 U.S.C. 8906a when they have completed one year of current continuous employment, excluding any break in service of five days or less and must pay both the employee and the Government shares of the premium.

Intermittent Employment

Intermittent employees who do not have a prearranged regular tour of duty are not eligible for coverage. Seasonal or occasional employment for one calendar year that amounted to less than six months of work does not meet the one year of current continuous employment requirement.

Dental and Vision Insurance

Dental and Vision insurance are optional insurances. You will pay the full premium and you can only make changes during open season. There are no pre-existing condition exclusions or waiting periods (except for orthodontia). Employees are eligible for dental/vision if they are eligible for FEHB coverage. (You do not have to be enrolled in FEHB). Dental, Vision, and FEHB insurance plans operate completely separately and independently. You enroll on www.benefeds.com and you have 60 days after employment begins to elect coverage or during an annual Benefits Open Season.

Flexible Spending Accounts - Health and Dependent Care

A Flexible Spending Account (FSA) is a tax-favored program offered by employers that allow you to pay for your eligible out-of-pocket health care and dependent care expenses with pre-tax dollars. By using pre-tax dollars to pay for eligible health care and dependent care expenses, an FSA gives you an immediate discount on these expenses that equals the taxes you would otherwise pay on that money.

In other words, with an FSA, you can both reduce your taxes and get more for your money by saving 20% to

more than 40% on the dollars you would normally pay for out-of-pocket health care and dependent care expenses with after-tax (as opposed to untaxed) dollars.

FSAFEDS offers two types of FSAs:

- **The Health Care Flexible Spending Account (HCFSA)** can be used to pay for qualified medical costs and health care expenses that are not paid by your Federal Employees Health Benefits (FEHB) plan or any other insurance, but cannot be used to pay for any type of insurance premiums, including long-term care insurance premiums.

- **The Dependent Care Flexible Spending Account (DCFSA)** can be used to pay for eligible dependent care expenses such as childcare for children under age 13 or children who are physically or mentally incapable of self-care and, in some cases, eldercare, so that you – and your spouse, if you are married – can work, look for work, or attend school full-time.

Your participation in either FSA is completely voluntary, and it’s important to remember that unlike other Federal Benefits, your FSA election is only effective for one year. In other words, you must enroll in one or both FSAs each year that you choose to participate. If you do not enroll during Open Season, you will not participate for the next Benefit Period, unless you experience a Qualifying Life Event (QLE) that allows you to make an election outside of Open Season. Open Season for FSAFEDS runs concurrently with the FEHB Open Season in November and December each year for enrollment in the following year. The FSAFEDS Benefit Period will always run from January 1 through March 15 of the following year.

You may set up an account, within 60 days of hire and your election(s) will become effective the day following acceptance of your enrollment. If you enroll during Open Season, your election(s) will not be effective until January 1 of the new Benefit Period. You cannot enroll on, or after, October 1 of any Benefit Period.

See <https://www.fsafeds.com/fsafeds/index.asp> to enroll or find more information.

Federal Long-Term Care Insurance Program

Long-term care (LTC) Insurance is insurance that helps you pay for long-term care services, such as home care or care in a nursing home or assisted living facility. LTC may provide for some financial relief or the providing of assistance when the kind of care needed concerns help in performing daily activities if you had an ongoing illness or disability. It also includes the kind of care you would need if you had a severe cognitive problem like Alzheimer's disease. It is help with eating, bathing,

dressings, transferring from a bed to a chair, toileting, continence, etc. It is for chronic care that you might need for the rest of your life. You can receive it in your own home, at a nursing home or other long-term care facility. LTC can be expensive but it can be an economically prudent decision for some employees. Enrollment is not automatic and involves underwriting. Employees interested in this program are encouraged to visit the Federal LTC Insurance Program at www.ltcfeds.com. The employee pays full costs.

Health Savings Accounts

A High Deductible Health Plan (HDHP) with a Health Savings Account (HSA) or a Health Reimbursement Arrangement (HRA) provides traditional medical coverage and a tax free way to help you build savings for future medical expenses. The HDHP features higher annual deductibles (a minimum of \$1,100 for Self and \$2,200 for Self and Family coverage) than other traditional health plans. With the exception of preventive care, you must meet the annual deductible before the plan pays benefits.

When you enroll in an HDHP, the health plan determines if you are eligible for a Health Savings Account (HSA) or a Health Reimbursement Arrangement (HRA). If you are Medicare enrolled, you are not eligible for an HSA. Each month, the plan automatically credits a portion of the health plan premium into your HSA or HRA, based on your eligibility as of the first day of the month. You can pay your deductible with funds from your HSA or HRA.

Life Insurance

The Federal Employees' Group Life Insurance (FEGLI) program provides group term life insurance to eligible employees. You are enrolled automatically in basic life insurance unless you waive the coverage. The cost of basic insurance depends on your annual pay rate. You pay 2/3 of the total cost and the government pays 1/3. Your age does not affect the cost of basic insurance.

In addition to the basic, there are three forms of optional insurance available. 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 open seasons are rare; elections of coverage generally is best made when first offered. You pay the full cost of optional insurance; the cost of optional insurance depends on your age.

Most Federal employees, including part-time employees, are eligible to enroll. Basic life insurance

coverage and it 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. You must elect Optional insurance within 31 days of appointment.

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 are discontinued when yearly earnings reach the maximum wage base level determined by the Social Security Administration.

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 employer covers the cost of EAP. Costs associated with referral may be covered by Medical benefits.

Call the NRCS' EAP vendor, The Sands Creek Group, 1(888) 243-5744, or TDD – 800-627-3529.

Transit Benefit Program

Employees who use public transportation to commute to work may be eligible to participate in a Transit Benefit Program that reimburses up to \$300/month in transportation costs. Contact Human Resources for information.

Retirement

The Federal Employees Retirement System (FERS) covers all Federal employees hired after January 1, 1984. If you had previous Federal employment under the "old" Civil Service Retirement System (CSRS), you may be

under a different system called CSRS-Offset, which is a mix of CSRS and Social Security coverage. For more information about retirement, see the OPM website at www.opm.gov. If you are not sure which retirement system applies to you, be sure to find out. The systems have fundamental differences in how benefits accumulate.

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 7.5 percent of pay to cover the cost of their benefits: 1.3 percent goes to the civil service retirement fund and covers the basic annuity benefit and 6.2 percent goes to pay for Social Security benefits. In addition, we pay 1.45 percent for Medicare coverage; there is no cap on Medicare deductions.

FERS employees retiring with an unreduced annuity after 30 years will receive a basic benefit equal to 30 percent of their high-3 years of average salary as compared to 56.25 percent for CSRS and CSRS-Offset employees. 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). This benefit may be payable to a former spouse (in whole or in part) if a qualifying court so orders. The rules are somewhat different for those under the old CSRS retirement system.

The Thrift Savings Plan

The Thrift Savings Plan (TSP) is a valuable way to build up a nest egg for your retirement. It is 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 can invest up to \$16,500 annually (limit set by the IRS).

Your agency will automatically contribute 1 percent of your basic pay each pay period to your account. Starting in August 2010, employees will be automatically enrolled to contribute 3 percent of their salary to their

TSP. ***Important – you must take action to cancel this automatic contribution.*** Your agency will match 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

TSP contributions will begin on your first pay period. If changes are made in your payroll contributions, they will be effective the first full pay period after your agency accepts your TSP Election Form (TSP-1). You can change the amount of contributions at any time (but no more than once a pay period). You can move your account balances among the funds once per month, through interfund transfers. The TSP sends participants statements annually showing their account balances, loan status, vesting status and other information.

Investment Choices

G Fund – Government Securities Investment Fund - Short-term US Treasury securities specially issued to the TSP.

F Fund – Fixed Income Index Investment Fund - A broad index representing the US bond market.

C Fund – Common Stock Index Investment Fund - A broad index of stocks of 500 medium to large-size companies.

S Fund – Small Capitalization Stock Index Fund - A broad index of stocks of small to medium-size companies.

I Fund – International Stock Index Investment Fund - A broad international market index (EAFE)

L Fund – “Lifecycle” Funds - TSP will rebalance each fund automatically to adjust the market changes. The intent is to maximize your return on investment while providing adequate funds in retirement.

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. Loan payments are made through payroll deductions 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 www.tsp.gov or the TSP ThriftLine at (504) 255-8777.

TSP Catch-Up Provisions

Employees that enter the year of their 50th birthday can also make supplemental tax-deferred contributions to their TSP accounts in addition to the regular contributions defined in the basic entitlement (above). The Agency does not match catch-up contributions and IRS limits the amount to \$5,500 per tax year. Employees who may be eligible for this program are encouraged to review the TSP website at www.tsp.gov or the TSP ThriftLine at (504) 255-8777 if they need additional information.

Automated Systems

WebTCAS (Web-based Total Cost Accounting System) & Timekeeping

WebTCAS, an internet-based timekeeping system, is where you will record the hours you work. At the end of each two-week pay period, you finalize and submit your timesheet to your assigned timekeeper.

Your supervisor will provide training to you on the use of WebTCAS and the program, activity and county codes you will use to record your work status. It is important that you accurately record not only your hours of work and leave, but also the activities in which you are involved. Our timekeeping web site is <http://webtcas.nrcs.usda.gov/webtcas/>.

EmpowHR/Human Resources Information System (HRIS) (formerly ICAMS or CAMS)

EmpowHR/HRIS is an automated system for processing personnel actions. The data in this system is integrated with WebTCAS. The Human Resources Office provides an EmpowHR/HRIS ID and password to you during your first pay period with NRCS. When you receive them, you will have access to the system to view your personal data as recorded by the Human Resources Office. The web site is <https://icams.usda.gov>.

eAuthentication

The USDA eAuthentication Service is used by USDA agencies to enable customers and employees to obtain accounts that will allow them to access USDA Web applications, and services via the Internet. NRCS uses the eAuthentication Service to protect many of its Web

applications and services (e.g., WebTCAS, my NRCS, PRS, etc.).

NRCS requires the use of the employee's alpha-numeric ICAMS Operator Login ID (e.g., JJ012345) as the User ID for their eAuthentication account.

NRCS employees should not register using their first and last names, or any other User ID format. The employee registration process uses employee payroll and personnel data from the National Finance Center (NFC) to confirm their identity as an employee with the USDA. Therefore, an employee must receive their first paycheck and have the appropriate data from their Notification of Personnel Action (SF-50B) and Earnings and Leave Statement (AD-334) before they can register for the eAuthentication account.

AgLearn

AgLearn is the USDA enterprise-wide learning management system (LMS) available for all USDA Federal employees. In AgLearn you may request national training courses, get approval for external courses or take USDA web-based courses.

AgLearn may be accessed (after your first pay is processed) using your eAuth log in and password at <http://ww.agLearn.usda.gov>.

NFC Employee Personal Page

You have access to your own Employee Personal Page (EPP) through the USDA 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 and make changes as you require. You'll need a personal identification number (PIN) to access the NFC Employee Personal Page. The payroll system will mail you your first PIN within 7-10 days from your hire date.

The NFC Page is the only location for you to view/print your "Statement of Earnings and Leave" for each pay period. The Statement of Earnings and Leave shows your gross pay, deductions, and net pay. It is your responsibility to verify that the statements accurately reflect required and 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 and provides updates on agency programs, guidance and events.

eOPF

NRCS operates under an electronic system of records to maintain personnel data. You will have access to your own electronic Official Personnel Folder (eOPF) and are entitled to this information. You are responsible for notifying Human Resources of any change in your name, home address, and family status during your employment.

As an employee, you should maintain important personnel 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
- Awards

Career Management

Agencies may promote, demote or reassign career or career-conditional employees under a variety of circumstances. They also may make time-limited promotions of up to five years to fill temporary positions, accomplish project work, fill positions temporarily pending reorganization, or to meet other temporary needs. Generally, General Schedule employees promoted to a higher grade 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. 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.

Present Federal employees who are serving in the competitive service under a career or career-conditional appointment have eligibility for transfer to a position in the competitive service. To transfer, they must meet the qualification requirements for the position and be suitable for employment in competitive service positions. If the current appointment is subject to a suitability investigation, that condition continues after the transfer.

Position Classification

The General Schedule (GS) system groups similar positions into occupational series, classes, or grades. This system ensures that positions that require comparable qualifications and do substantially the same work receive equal pay. The system's design is to provide a systematic grouping of positions by kind of work, level of difficulty and responsibility, and required qualifications of the position. The Office of Personnel Management provides the basic standards for the classification system and provides written standards and guides used by all Government Agencies. Employee performance does not affect the classification process. The Agency rewards employee performance 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, an employee's length of service, or superior qualifications.

Position Description

A position description is the official record of your major duties and responsibilities and the supervisory responsibilities of your position. Your supervisor will provide you a written Position Description for your job. The duties and responsibilities assigned to you will determine your title, the kind of position you occupy, the level or grade, series, and the base pay that you will receive for performing the work. If significant changes take place in your job, your supervisor should take steps to see if a new position description is applicable; and if it is, submit it for classification review. You and your supervisor have joint responsibility for reviewing your position description, annually, 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 their performance will be evaluated. 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. 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. Employees receive an annual performance summary that

documents and rates their performance in meeting these standards.

NRCS Mentoring Program

The NRCS Mentoring program is designed to provide assistance and guidance to new employees, student trainees, and current employees as they explore options and plan career growth strategies at NRCS.

The mentoring process links an experienced person (mentor) with a less experienced person (protégé), to foster the career development and professional growth of the protégé. The mentoring process requires that the mentor and protégé work together, often 1 to 3 years, to reach specific goals and to provide each other with sufficient feedback to ensure that these goals are reached. Participating in a mentoring program requires commitment and hard work. Mentoring should be used in conjunction with training, details, special assignments, cross training, and other learning opportunities. Mentoring can take place within the State or across State lines.

Mentor - The mentor is the experienced professional who fosters the career development and professional growth of the protégé, who is not in a supervisory capacity to the protégé.

Protégé - The protégé is the individual whose career development and professional growth is fostered by the mentor.

All current employees may request a mentor at any time and become a protégé. Mentors may be selected from a pool of volunteers or at the request of the protégé. Contact Human Resources for more information.

Telework

Telecommuting (or telework) is working at an alternate location within the organizational unit's commuting area on a routine, scheduled, infrequent, or recurring basis. Positions intentionally located at a college, university, specified location etc., or advertised with a duty station outside of the organizational unit because of the requirements of the position do not meet the definition of telecommuting.

Telecommuting is a management option, not an automatic right of employees. Telework participation requires an approved written agreement signed by the telecommuting employee, his or her supervisor, and

approved by the STC outlining the details of the telecommuting program and the responsibilities of the employee and the supervisor. Management may cancel or modify the agreement at any time, after discussion with the employee, if the agreement fails to benefit and/or meet organizational needs.

Training

NRCS encourages all employees to participate in training opportunities. There are some annual training requirements for all employees such as Cyber security, the Constitution, Ethics, and Sexual Harassment. All new employees should take the web-based "Introduction to NRCS." You and your supervisor will discuss your training needs and develop an individual development plan.

The National Educational Development Center (NEDC) is the focal point for training in NRCS. The Center maintains a staff who works to provide timely, sequential, competency-based training fundamental to our business of conservation. A catalog of available NEDC courses is available at www.aglearn.usda.gov. All NEDC courses and external training requests are made through the AgLearn system.

Merit Promotion

When a vacancy occurs within NRCS, the selecting official may fill the position through the Merit Promotion Program or other means within Office of Personnel Management and NRCS regulations. Under the Merit Promotion Program, vacancy announcements are published and you as an interested employee may submit an application. Virtually all government vacancy announcements are available at www.usajobs.opm.gov. Also check <https://my.nrcs.usda.gov>

Vacancy announcements give the job title, series, and grade; describe the duties; outline the qualification requirements; state other knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) that are required for the job; and give application procedures. Candidates who have been found to be "basically qualified" by a personnel specialist may then be evaluated by one or more subject matter experts who have knowledge and experience in that field. Candidates who are determined to be the best qualified are then referred to the selecting official for consideration. Qualification requirements for federal positions are described in the OPM Operating Manual, Qualification Standards for

General Schedule Positions. You may review these standards by visiting the OPM web site at <http://www.opm.gov/qualifications/index.asp>.

Awards

Agencies have various award systems for their employees as recognition for ongoing good performance, suggestions, and inventions or for special contributions to the agency's mission. See New York' Recognition Book at <http://www.ny.nrcs.usda.gov/about/hr/awards.html>.

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, 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. 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.

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. See <http://www.eeoc.gov/facts/qanda.html> for more information.

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 MSPB's jurisdiction.

NRCS encourages early resolution of workplace and program disputes using the Alternative Dispute Resolution Program. These procedures vary. Contact Human Resources.

Civil Rights and Equal Employment Opportunity

NRCS is committed to ensuring that every customer and colleague is treated with fairness, equality, and respect; and without regard to race, color, national origin, gender, religion, age, disability, sexual orientation, marital or family status, political beliefs, parental status, or protected genetic information.

In NRCS, we strive for a workplace that is inclusive and respectful of differences, while working toward unity and harmony. And we deliver programs and services to all people fairly and with integrity and equality.

Grievances/Alternative Dispute Resolution

Several processes are available to NRCS employees to address employment-related concerns. Most issues can be easily resolved by simply sitting down with the other party and calmly discussing the situation. However, occasionally outside assistance is helpful to reach resolution. NRCS firmly endorses the use of Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) to address issues when they first arise. Under ADR, a trained mediator works with the parties involved to identify common ground and facilitate the use of a structured process to address concerns and reach agreements. Your supervisor or the Human Resources Office will be happy to provide you with additional information about ADR at your request.

When informal methods don't fully address an employee's concerns, there are two formal methods that may apply: the administrative grievance process, and the EEO complaint process. Information on these systems may be found in 360 Personnel GM 412 and 230 Equal Employment Opportunity GM 401, or you may contact your supervisor or the Human Resources Office for additional information. Or see http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/about/civilrights/employment_complaints_branch.html.

Reasonable Accommodations

It is the policy of NRCS to make reasonable accommodations to the known physical or mental limitations of qualified applicants or employees with disabilities except when such accommodation would cause an undue hardship to the Agency. For more information, read the general manual section on accommodations at http://policy.nrcs.usda.gov/scripts/lpsiis.dll/GM/GM_230_401_c.htm.

The USDA Target Center is available to ensure that all USDA employees have safe and equal access to electronic and information technology by assessing,

educating, and advocating for the integration of assistive technology and worksite accommodations. For more information call the Target Center at 202-720-2600 or <http://www.usda.gov/oo/target/>.

The Privacy Act of 1974

You will have occasion to handle an array of information and records concerning the land, landowners and land users who receive technical assistance from NRCS. You need to understand the impact of pertinent records guidelines, particularly, The Freedom of Information Act and the Privacy Act, on the way we handle this information.

As a government employee you may have to work with or handle records or information about individuals. Generally, such records will require special handling and safeguarding because they are subject to the requirements of the Privacy Act. The Privacy Act establishes special requirements for collecting, creating, maintaining, and distributing records that can be retrieved by the name of an individual or other identifier (whether in paper or electronic form). These are called Privacy Act Systems of Records. Our Conservation Plan files are one example of a Privacy Act System of Records.

The subject of a Privacy Act System of Records can ask to see, correct, and appeal the information in that record. These disclosure restrictions are subject to civil and criminal penalties. For more information, contact your Freedom of Information Act (FOIA)/Privacy Act Officer.

The Freedom of Information Act (FOIA)

The Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) is meant to ensure that the public has access to information that is maintained by the government. FOIA also recognizes that the government must safeguard certain information that falls under one of the nine FOIA exemptions. Some of the requirements of the Electronic FOIA Amendments of 1996 ensure access to government information maintained in all formats (e.g. E-mail, back-up tapes), and makes more information available to the public electronically. (See the NRCS Freedom of Information Act web site at <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/about/foia/>).

If you receive a request from the public for information, you will need to consult with your supervisor to determine whether the material requested is public or nonpublic information. Even if a request does not cite FOIA, you should still consider whether it is protected under FOIA or the Privacy Act. Refer to 120 GM Part 408 for additional information. Records that are not routinely made available to the public must be requested

under FOIA procedures to ensure a thorough review for sensitive information. Consult your supervisor and the FOIA Officer for additional information.

Safety and Health

Accident Reporting and Worker's Compensation

The Federal Employees Compensation Act (FECA) provides workers' compensation benefits to federal employees who sustain job-related injuries or illnesses.

IF YOU ARE INJURED WHILE IN THE PERFORMANCE OF DUTY, THEN YOU MUST notify your supervisor within 24 hours of the date of injury and request that an "Injury Packet" is sent next-day delivery.

IMMEDIATE STEPS YOU MUST TAKE:

Upon receipt of the Injury Packet, immediately complete the appropriate form (Form CA-1 - Notice of Traumatic Injury and Claim for Continuation of Pay/Compensation -OR- Form CA-2 - Notice of Occupational Disease and Claim for Compensation) and fax or hand-deliver it to your supervisor within two (2) days of the date of injury. You may also download these forms at <http://www.dol.gov/esa/regs/compliance/owcp/forms.htm>.

If your supervisor has faxed you Form CA-16 (Authorization for Examination and/or Treatment), then you **MUST** take the form with you during your initial doctor's visit and advise that the visit be billed to the Department of Labor's Office of Workers Compensation Program. This form authorizes treatment and is good only for up to one week after the date of injury.

If more than a week has passed since you reported the injury, your supervisor may refuse to issue you a Form CA-16, on the basis that the need for immediate treatment would become apparent in that period of time. Therefore, to avoid problems with your claim, notify your supervisor of any work-related injuries when they occur. Also note that in the event of an emergency, you should seek medical attention and not wait for any forms, but request that your supervisor send Form CA-16 and other relevant forms directly to your physician via fax.

When you return the form, ask for a signed copy for your records, which includes the completion of the Supervisor's Report. Please **DO NOT** send forms directly to OWCP. Human Resources **MUST** send the forms CA-1 and CA-2 to OWCP within 10 days of the

injury. Failure to comply with the steps listed above could result in a delay in processing your claim and/or in the denial of your claim and/or benefits.

Contact the Human Resources Manager, within three days of delivering form CA-1 or CA-2 to your supervisor, to ensure that they also have a copy of the completed form. If not, you should fax them a copy.

Take Forms CA-17 and CA-20 from the packet with you to your initial doctor's visit. (Important: Please check that the Supervisor's portion of Form CA-17 is complete prior to giving it to your doctor. If not, ask your Supervisor to complete their portion of the CA-17 and submit it to you right away). Form CA-20 will be used for all subsequent visits to the doctor. Your Supervisor should provide additional CA-20s as often as needed).

For additional information please contact your supervisor.

OTHER ACTIONS YOU MUST TAKE

- Return to work as soon as medically possible.
- Call your supervisor and timekeeper on a weekly basis to update them on all absenteeism relevant to the work-related injury and the status of your ability to return to work in a light or full duty status.
- Continue to submit medical evidence (Form CA-20 or doctor's narrative) to your supervisor, as requested, for all days taken off from work due to the work-related injury.
- Ensure that copies of all medical documents sent to your supervisor are also received by the Human Resources Manager.
- At the request of your supervisor, contact your doctor's office to resolve billing errors. (Important: This is necessary because FECA law indicates that the injured employee is the only one with the legal right to contact the doctor by telephone.)
- Select a physician that meets the definition of "physician" under the FECA and who must not have been excluded from payment under the program.

Important: Employees, who wish to change physicians after the initial choice, must contact OWCP in writing for approval and include the reasons for wanting to change. (See Chapter 6 of OWCP Publication CA-810) and/or
OWCP Website:
<http://www.dol.gov/esa/regs/compliance/owcp/fecacont.htm>.

If you receive a bill from your doctor, send it directly to the following address: U.S. Department of Labor,

DFEC Central Mailroom, P.O. Box 8300, London, KY 40742-8300 and be sure to include your claim number on EVERY page you send. If you have not been assigned a claim number contact T&T at (301) 446-6080 to see if a claim number has been assigned to you. Once you are given the claim number, forward the bill to the above-mentioned address.

If you want to check the status of a bill or claim for reimbursement, go directly to the OWCP website at <http://owcp.dol.acs-inc.com>. This service is also available 24 hours a day via their Interactive Voice Response (IVR) system. To access the IVR, please dial 866-335-8319. To speak with a Customer Service Representative you may call toll-free at 850-558-1818. This number is available Monday - Friday, 8am - 8pm, EST.

Important: A number of statutory provisions (20 CFR - 10.16) make it a crime to file a false or fraudulent claim or statement with the government in connection with a claim under the FECA, or to wrongfully impede a FECA claim.

Important: Administrative proceedings may be initiated under the Program Fraud Civil Remedies Act of 1986 (PFCRA), 31 U.S.c. 3801-12, to impose civil penalties and assessments against persons who make, submit, or present, or cause to be made, submitted or presented, false, fictitious or fraudulent claims or written statements to OWCP in connection with a claim under the FECA.

Important: Several sources describing the provisions of the law and how they are applied are available in printed form and on OWCP's Home Page at <http://www.dol.gov/esa/regs/compliance/owcp/fecacont.htm>.

You are responsible for completing and submitting to your supervisor: - The appropriate Dept. of Labor Office of Worker's Compensation Programs (OWCP) form (CA-1, CA-2). Type directly on the Electronic CA-1 (Federal Employee's Notice of Traumatic Injury and Claim for Continuation of Pay/Compensation) or CA-2 (Notice of Occupational Disease and Claim for Compensation) Form. Print and sign Form and send to your supervisor.

Your supervisor is responsible for submitting: - The appropriate Dept. of Labor OWCP forms (CA-16 or CA-17) to the Human Resources Office, who will send the information to T & T Management.

A Message from Human Resources

Before the internet, it was sometimes difficult and often frustrating to find out about human resources regulations

and entitlements. Often times your ability to acquire information was limited to skills of your local Human Resource Office. Now you can do just about anything online and find answers to almost any conceivable question you have quickly and easily. However, remember that not everything published on the internet is factual and simply being on the web does not confirm validity. Government (.gov) websites generally are factual but may not always reflect the most current rules.

Feel free to contact us on any of your concerns. Employment changes, relocation and other life events can be stressful; we understand this and are here to make your transition easier on yourself and the agency.

Currently the Human Resources Team consists of Theresa M. Odekirk, the HR Officer. She can be reached at (315) 477-6512 or emailed at: Theresa.Odekirk@ny.usda.gov; Daniel Hall, HR Specialist at (315) 477-6514 or emailed at: Daniel.Hall@ny.usda.gov, and Doris O'Brien, HR Specialist at (315) 477-6534 or emailed at: Doris.Obrien@ny.usda.gov.