

Advancing Diversity in the Northern Plains Area



April 2012

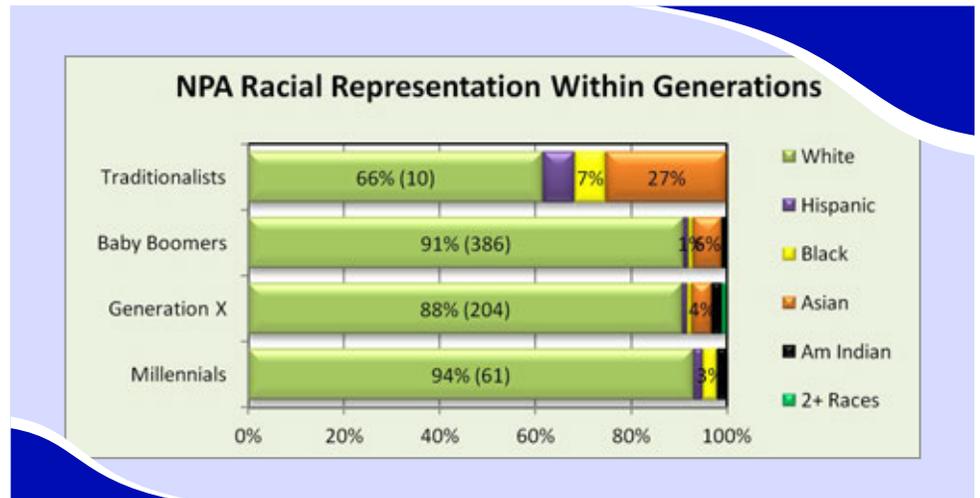
Recruitment Survey Highlights and Preliminary Results

By Francisco Calderón
 Soil Scientist, Akron, CO

Last September, the Diversity Task Force offered its online Recruitment Survey. This survey is an initiative taken by the Task Force to learn whether employees in NPA feel that positions are recruited for and marketed as effectively as possible, and to identify what might be done to improve recruitment and marketing of positions. The broader objective is to improve both the overall quality and the diversity of applicants for NPA positions.

The survey was voluntary, and had 210 respondents out of 700-plus employees in the Northern Plains Area. The survey should be regarded as non-scientific due to its voluntary nature, but never the less it will be a good snapshot about how NPA employees perceive the recruitment process and what kind of practices are in place right now across the area. Respondents came from a variety of occupational categories and race ethnicities that made up a good representation of the NPA. The questions covered several aspects related to the recruitment process such as search panels, interviews, applicants, advertising, policies, and other miscellaneous items.

The questions addressing the search panels indicate that while the majority of RL, AO, and SY positions use evaluation panels, technician and administrative support positions often do not. This is important, because our diversity on the NPA is found largely on the SY and RL ranks, so there is room for improvement



The DTF Recruitment Survey's ultimate goal is to improve NPA recruitment methods for identifying and attracting quality applicants, while increasing employee diversity at all levels.

on the recruitment of diverse applicants for lower grade positions. Currently, the policies and procedures for hiring scientists are more standardized than for technicians, and the DTF wanted to check how hiring differs for the different occupations. The majority of the respondents thought that having evaluation panels that are diverse in terms of race, gender, occupation and age is important.

Questions regarding advertising indicate that there is mixed success in our ability to bring positions to the attention of high quality diverse candidates. Lack of diversity in the local area, as well as lack of diversity in the occupation ranked among the main issues according to the respondents. There was a tendency for respondents to believe that standardized job descriptions are not effective for conveying the nature of a job.

Many respondents felt that including name and contact information of someone knowledgeable about the job would be a positive change that could be implemented at the area level. There were mixed results regarding how respondents felt about bringing open positions to the attention of qualified applicants belonging to under-represented groups, and the majority of respondents never used personal contacts to target applications from under-represented groups. This suggests that there is room for improvement in this area. One interesting result of the survey is how word-of-mouth and knowing someone at the location are perceived to be effective for recruiting highly qualified applicants, as effective as advertising in USAJobs.

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Survey....

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Respondents largely did not know if there is targeted advertising for minorities, and little use of resources for recruiting veterans and people with disabilities. Clearly an area that deserves further scrutiny.

The questions relating to policies yielded some interesting results, especially those dealing with competitive recruiting for STEP/LA student hiring. The majority of respondents stated that STEP/LA positions are only sometimes (or never) filled through a competitive process. This can be problematic because these appointments can potentially feed into permanent positions without ever competing or giving the opportunity for a larger applicant pool.

It was very good to see that the majority of respondents (89 percent) indicated that they value diversity, but still 6 percent believes that diversity has no value. This indicates that there are opportunities for increasing the awareness about the importance of diversity within our ranks.

Besides the multiple choice questions, respondents were also able to expand and state their opinion on several open questions dealing with dual career couples, soliciting applications from under-represented groups, assistance from the Area Office for recruitment of under-represented groups, assistance for generating diverse applicant groups, reasons for working in ARS, as well as general comments. These questions brought about hundreds of often well thought out and insightful comments.

At present, the DTF, in collaboration with Mark West, is in the process of summarizing the data and looking for interesting cross comparisons. Among other things, the DTF is interested in finding out how the respondents differ according to whether they served on evaluation panels, whether they have been selecting officials, as well as the respondent's race/gender or ethnicity. This work is ongoing and we hope to have a more in-depth analysis soon. Once all of the analysis is carried out, the survey results will be condensed as an educational product, or an item that can be added to ARMPS reviews to bring awareness to this important issue. ♦

TIPS FOR HIRING THE DISABLED

The 'Schedule A' Hiring Authority: Save Time, Resources While Increasing Workforce Diversity

*By Nate Slattengren
 CO Div. of Vocational Rehabilitation
 Federal Business Outreach Specialist*

One of the most common complaints about the federal hiring process is that it takes too long. Completing all steps in the competitive hiring process takes an average of 102 days, resulting in lost productivity and potentially missing out on qualified candidates who can't afford to wait for a decision. The Schedule A hiring authority eliminates many of the competitive hiring steps, dramatically reducing the time it takes to fill a needed position.

Schedule A allows federal employers to quickly fill positions with qualified individuals with disabilities. With Schedule A, employers can hire a candidate without the typical posting and publicizing of the position that the competitive recruitment process requires. The process is non-competitive, which means Human Resources Specialists and/or Selective Placement Coordinators send resumes of qualified applicants directly to managers. If a manager likes the resume, s/he has the option to interview and hire the candidate immediately.

To be eligible for a Schedule A appointment, candidates must meet the Office of Personnel Management's qualification standards for the position s/he is applying for. Candidates must

also obtain written proof of disability and a certification of job readiness from a licensed medical professional, a state, federal or private vocational rehabilitation specialist, or any government agency that issues or provides disability benefits. Individuals with disabilities may apply by submitting a resume and this supporting documentation directly to an agency's HR Specialist, Selective Placement Coordinator or equivalent.

Where can an agency find qualified and motivated Schedule A candidates? The Colorado Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR) is the state's largest source of skilled and qualified job seekers with disabilities. With more than 50 years of experience in helping individuals with disabilities find and retain employment, DVR specializes in matching the best talent with the right jobs. DVR's Federal Business Outreach Initiative is focused on helping federal employers fill their vacancies with qualified candidates using the Schedule A hiring authority.

For more information about DVR's services or the Schedule A hiring authority, please contact DVR's Federal Business Outreach Specialist, Nate Slattengren, at 303.866.2217 or nate.slattengren@state.co.us.

All states have vocational rehabilitation offices – Nate can connect you with direct contacts in your state. Additionally, feel free to contact Barbara King, Kathi White or Lynda Jensen at the NPA Area Office for additional resources. ♦

Northern Plains Notes

By Mickey McGuire

NPA Acting Area Director, Fort Collins, CO

This past year has been a whirlwind of activities – from the announcement of the ARS administrative support restructuring in March of last year to a crush of retirements and location closures and redirections. Although no NPA locations were closed, retirements and the administrative restructuring have nonetheless had a tremendous impact on how ARS and NPA look.

One of the biggest changes is, of course, the retirement of Dr. Will Blackburn after serving the NPA as Director for 17 years. During his tenure all but three of the current Research Leaders in the NPA were hired. Under his guidance and leadership, NPA prospered in many ways. First and foremost, Will stressed the importance of hiring really good people at all levels of the organization, and our employees continue to prove that they are the best. Will was an excellent mentor to many of us and, I'm confident that all of NPA recognize and appreciate just how much his vision and leadership helped make NPA what it is today. Support of scientist was always a priority of Will's, as was making sure that location facilities were upgraded and state-of-the-art equipment acquired. Under his leadership, nearly every location underwent significant renovation and/or upgrading of facilities. During the retirement reception, a number of former colleagues noted that Will was always accessible and his calm demeanor helped bring even the largest problems into focus. Talking to Will, you always knew that he was able to filter out the "noise" and give sound advice on how seemingly insurmountable obstacles can be worked through without losing one's sanity or enthusiasm. One of his favorite sayings was "Let me tell you what we're going to do..."

I have enjoyed my time as Acting Area Director for the past few months and look forward to the arrival of Larry Chandler as the new Director. Many of you may remember Larry in one of his several capacities serving the NPA as Research Leader at Brookings, Center Director at Fargo and Associate Area Director for the NPA. Larry has spent the last four years serving as Area Director of the Midwest Area, and will take over the reins of NPA

July 1. I would like to take this opportunity to thank Bryan Kaphammer and Tom Shanower for their efforts as Acting Associate Area Directors and a special thanks to all of you for your support during the transition.

The usual festivities of the holiday season were somewhat muted by the crush of 30 retirements, many of which were driven by the early-out/buy-out options and restructuring. Eight locations had at least one employee retire at the end of the year. The contributions of these employees cannot be fully measured, and all will be missed. I extend my deep gratitude to these men and women for their substantial service and wish them a healthy and satisfying well-earned retirement.

At the same time, a number of employees have been impacted by the business service centers. The business service centers went "live" the second week of February, and the transition has been relatively smooth. As is the case with any restructuring of this magnitude, there are bound to be any number of unforeseen issues arise, some of which have already emerged and are being actively addressed. The Director of the Western Business Service Center, Jeff Van Houten, visited with the new service center employees in Fort Collins the second week of March and met individually with the members of his new team.

Although no NPA locations were closed as a result of the FY 12 budget implementation several locations in NPA are eagerly awaiting the arrival of re-directed employees from various locations within ARS., We trust our locations receiving impacted employees will greet them with our usual NPA enthusiasm as we help them transition into their new positions and community. As a result of the program and location closures and relocation of employees, the Agency has instituted a hiring freeze that has caused delays in hiring the personnel that are so essential to our mission. While we anticipate the hiring freeze will be loosened this summer, we are asking for your patience as we begin to fill these positions. I understand that many of you are helping to fill these gaps as we move forward into field season with reduced staff in many locations. As we start to fill these positions, we should seek opportunities to diversify our workforce.

While diversity often is framed as the

"right thing to do" it is important to think about diversity as a proven way of leveraging different perspectives that lead to better solutions, as described in Dr. Jin's essay, and also in Barbara King's column.



Dr. McGuire

The Area is once again helping to support summer interns and/or apprentices for the coming summer. The following SYs were selected as mentors and will receive co-funding through the Area Director's summer intern/apprenticeship program: Dr. Maysoon Mikha; Dr. Robert Cushman; Dr. Gayle Volk; Dr. Louise Comas; Dr. James Roemmich; Dr. James Strange; Dr. Kip Panter; Dr. Matt Sanderson; and Dr. Tom Geary.

Although this has been a tough year for the Agency in some respects, I fully agree with the closing sentiment expressed by Dr. Bill Kemp in his essay on morale: "I firmly believe that our best days are ahead of us." With that, best wishes to all NPA employees for another positive and rewarding year. ♦

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Have You Visited ARS' New R3 Website Yet?

By Heather Gossel
 NPA IT Specialist, Fort Collins, CO

R3 stands for Review, Refresh, and Reform, and it is ARS' new shared learning community. R3 provides ARS employees a gateway to shared development and to community exchange. There are many ways to engage: create a video, write a blog, participate in a discussion on our book this month, or share your ideas with Leadership on Y2C. On the site, you will see many things you are not used to seeing in ARS, and there are plenty of opportunities for you. You can make this shared learning community a success through your participation. Do any of these things, but do something to engage!

Upcoming topics for the R3 calendar are Inclusion and Outreach (April and May) and Managing Working and Connecting in a Virtual Environment (June and July). Employees are invited to add to those topics or other topics of their choice – just



Area Office adventurers Lisa Mullenax, Heather Gossel, Shannon Robbie, and Jessica Wernimont

follow the instructions on the site. The current topic on the R3 calendar is Work/Life Balance, and here is an excerpt of the latest blog entry:

Tales of an Adventurous AO Staff Volunteering at the Fort Collins Boys and Girls Club

Work/Life Balance - Helping USDA Give Back to the Community

When do a Contract Specialist, an Area Budget and Fiscal Officer, a Financial Technician, and an IT Specialist get to volunteer with kids in their community? On USDA's National Day of Service! That day, we were all just Volunteers with a capital "V"!

To continue reading the rest of this blog, [click here](#). ♦

WHERE IN THE NPA?



This NPA location is celebrating 100 years in 2012 in its not-so-little house on the prairie. Can you guess where in the NPA this early picture was taken?

(No fair looking at page 15!)

Show your own location pride! Share your pictures of scenic landmarks, fun festivities or occupational oddities that make your location uniquely you!

Please e-mail your pictures (with captions) to

*Beth Redlin at:
Beth.Redlin@ars.usda.gov*

*or to Barbara King at:
Barbara.King@ars.usda.gov*

ARS - Building Morale in the Workplace

SPECIAL SECTION ~ MORALE

“Our Agency” (with a reminder from **Simon Stimson**)

By *Bill Kemp*
 Center Director, Fargo, ND

We hear the word “morale” in conversations a lot these days. Communications from various sources suggest that we need to invent it, renew it, or deploy it. In government, amidst downsizing, we are frequently being asked to renew our shared commitment to each other, the very thing that has enabled us to achieve what we have to date. In the business section of any bookstore you can’t avoid encountering authors hawking the new, new way to improve morale. Likewise most of us have encountered Simon Stimson, at least once, but hopefully more than that. I’ll get to him shortly.

To be honest, I’m not sure just why I was asked to share my thoughts with you, but I think that it’s probably related to a conversation that occurred at the family dinner table some 30 years ago. You see, growing up as I did in the Berkshire Hills of western Massachusetts, I had the good fortune to be a part of an Irish Catholic family – this is a diversity taskforce newsletter, by the way - where one’s presence at dinnertime was sacrosanct. Not for fear of disciplinary measures, but because of the sheer delight in being able to argue over most any topic. Anyway, one evening the subject of hair dye came up, and being the eldest of five – 1 girl, and 4-boys, I know you’re wondering – I asked my dad “So, why don’t you dye your hair?” At the time, my dad was in his late fifties, not completely grey yet, but well on his way, and it was generally noted at our dinner table that a lot of his peers of similar age were sporting more youthful-looking, if (possibly) artificial, coloring. His response went something like this, he said, “I’ve found that it’s been easier to get my point across the greyer I’ve become, in spite of the fact that I’m no more insightful than I was 25 years ago.” Over the years, I’ve thought a lot about his response – actually, there are other implications to morale in his casual observation, the more you think

about it – but I recall at the time that I took it to mean that grey hair meant more experience assumed, etc, etc. Full disclosure, I now find myself at a similar stage in life to that of my dad’s which I just shared, so I offer you my two cents knowing full well that you, at whatever age, likely have insights which will put mine to shame – in fact, if you do, please volunteer for your own op-ed piece in future issues of VOICES. Fortunately, this entire issue of VOICES is devoted to morale and mentoring, so I am in hopes that everyone will find something that resonates, and that can be implemented in some creative way. You’re still wondering about Simon Stimson, I know, but please be patient.

With all that’s available in academia and business, through various media, you might think that it’s odd that, for me at least, some of the better insights to managing morale come from literature, fiction in particular. Indeed, exploring relationships – the human experience – is the essence of a large body of fiction. I found it fascinating to read years ago that Wallace Stegner, who wrote wonderful fiction and non-fiction with equal skill, once was quoted as saying “I use fiction to explain things to myself,” as, indeed, in much fictional work you get the sense that what is ultimately published is not just for the benefit of admiring readers. In my view, what is missing in much of the writing and practice of “leadership” is the relationships part. Yes, we allow the sociologists to bin us into 64 neat 4-character Meyers Briggs groupings – for those of you ENFP’s out there who are wondering, I’m an INTJ, by the way - and while this is useful it is really only the first step in the process whereby we get to mutual respect, and ultimately a

shared responsibility for our collective endeavor – morale – or as A.H. Leighton states “the capacity of a group of people to pull together persistently and consistently in pursuit of a common purpose.” For those

of you who do not have the advantage of grey hair, as I now do, and who likewise find morale-building media frequently cook book-ish, somewhat dusty, or worse, potentially misleading, I urge you to look more closely at the story within the story, in everything you read, especially so with fiction. OK, OK, for those of you who have been moved by relationships

depicted in non-fiction or biography, many of which are inspirational to read as well, I am in no way demeaning them here, merely pointing out the fact Stegner, with fiction, was not constrained by fact-checking when trying to explain something to himself related to the human condition. Of course, literature of any sort that explores relationships provides you with insights that you can test in the real world (with sensitivity, please!), and learn from the outcomes as you, like so many before you, plumb the gap between the theory and the practice of building and enabling morale.

As you may have gathered, understanding relationships is, in my opinion, the single most important aspect of achieving and maintaining morale in any organization. Relationships, of course, are complicated and in turn influence, and are likewise influenced by, communication – the oxygen of organizations like ours. And, yes, I have a reading (or viewing) assignment for you, and yes, the character of Simon Stimson has something for you to consider, like, every day.

“...understanding relationships is, in my opinion, the single most important aspect of achieving and maintaining morale in any organization.”

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SPECIAL SECTION - MORALE

‘Our Agency’... *Continued from page 5*

By now, I’ve given you plenty time to recall (google – OMG, it’s a verb now! - or skip ahead) that one of the better works on maintaining morale, not to mention leadership and life, is Thornton Wilder’s “Our Town.” This play, which I thought was an interesting story about New England communities familiar to me in my 7th grade literature class, has taken on richer meaning some 40 years on. In sum, Wilder distills life, and I submit leadership, into four main themes. First, “Everything changes.” You can see this in the updates between the three acts of the play, which are a mixture of events planned and unplanned, good and not so, all of which suggest that the only thing we have control over is how we respond, or, occasionally, cope with life’s events. What we are experiencing currently as public servants is, of course, temporary and not un-similar to what many of us experienced during the downsizing of 1994-1996. And yet, I am gratified, both now as then, in the way in which we have responded as an Agency. Every day I see examples of co-workers pitching in an attempt to “try to help others,” which by the way is the second theme in Wilder’s monumental achievement.

The last two themes can be characterized as “relationships transform us”, I’ve already covered this, and what is variously referred to as Carpe Diem – “Seize the day”, or for me, “be present for those around you.” There is a lot of evidence in the literature demonstrating that successful organizations, during times of uncertainty, devote additional effort to relationships and community, and in turn are sometimes transformed in unanticipated positive ways in the process. Through the Diversity Task Force, I have witnessed an increase in a wide variety of observances and public service activities across the NPA which not only strengthen our sense of community within locations, but also extend, through ever more sophisticated STEM-related (Science, Technology, Engineering, & Mathematics, google it!) efforts, the relationships that we maintain with the larger communities where we live and serve.

OK, we have finally arrived at Simon

Stimson’s reminder, but first let me refresh your memory with some context. We’re now in the Act Three, and an important character (I’m not going to share the character’s name and spoil it for those who have not read the play, or for those who have forgotten, but plan to re-read it) has just arrived among the dead and learns that in fact it is possible for the dead to return to experience one day in their previous life, although his/her fellow cemetery-mates don’t recommend doing so. Well, he/she decides to go back to his/her 12th birthday, and learns that watching the events which take place, that special day in the past, is much different than living or remembering them. This leads us to the following exchange:

Important character:

“Do any human beings ever realize life when they live it?—every, every minute?”

Stage manager (character):

“No.”

Pause.

“The saints and poets, maybe – they do some.”

...Additional back and forth takes place among the various cemetery-mates which ultimately leads to, well, you know who:

Simon Stimson (with growing agitation):

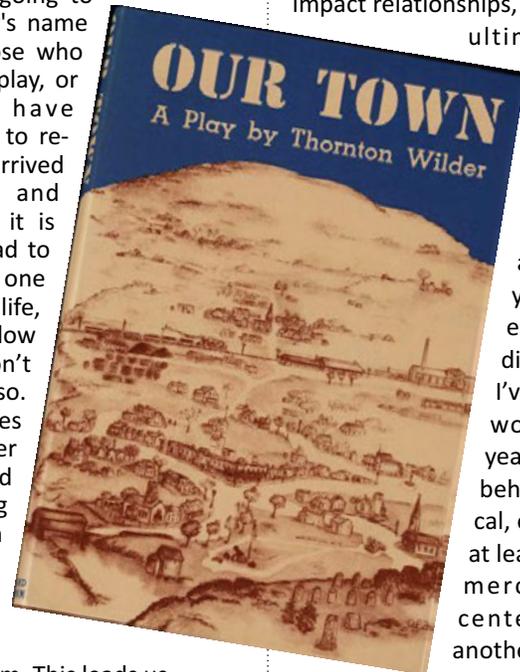
“Yes, now you know. Now you know! That’s what it was to be alive. To move about in a cloud of ignorance; to go up and down trampling the feelings of those...of those about you. To spend and waste time as though you had a million years. To always be at the mercy of one self-centered passion, or another. Now you know – that’s the happy existence you wanted to go back to. Ignorance and blindness.”

OK, Simon might seem a little over the top here reminding us of human tendencies which complicate things at home as well as impact relationships, communication, and ultimately morale in organizations like ours, but if you read, or re-read, the play he has his reasons. My reason for sharing Simon’s admonishment with you is because, oddly enough, in nearly any difficult situation that I’ve encountered in the workplace over the years - barring anything behaviorally pathological, of course - there was at least one person at the mercy of “one self-centered passion, or another.” Full disclosure, sometimes that individual

was me.

So, as an individual and Agency, how do we build and maintain morale? In my view, the themes are, in practice, deceptively simple and can be found among other places in a three act play about a small town anywhere on the planet: 1) Accept that things change – gradually; 2) Try to help others, but recognize that some things are out of your control; 3) Know that attending to relationships can bring transformational change to our Agency; and 4) Do your best to be present “every, every minute” of your brief life as a public servant.

In closing, I believe that the capacity of our Agency as a group of people pulling together persistently and consistently in pursuit of a common purpose is undiminished, and I hope that you enjoy the various perspectives on morale and mentoring shared by your NPA colleagues in this issue of VOICES. From where I sit, I firmly believe that our best days are ahead of us. ♦



Lending a Helping Hand

NPA Employees Applaud Co-Workers Who Guided Them

Earlier this spring we asked you to share your stories of who helped you when you first arrived in the NPA or who has been especially helpful since. Did you have a mentor (assigned or unassigned; formal/informal), or simply another co-worker who provided the basic information, guidance, suggestions you needed when you needed them? We also asked you to send us a short write-up describing your experience and publicly thanking that person (or persons) who provided you a helping hand, patient ear, kind advice, or just generally helped make you feel welcome and acknowledged.

We've had a great response, as you can see from the collection of "kudos" found on the following three pages! In fact the response has been so good that we'd like to keep it going. If you have someone, you'd like to recognize, consider sending a paragraph about your experience to Barbara King for inclusion in future issues and/or on the NPA Diversity Bulletin Board. ♦

Kudos for Co-Workers: **Bonnie King, Area Office**

When I started with ARS as a STEP student in the summer of 1997, I never imagined I would still be here almost fifteen years later. After a year of working as an Office Automation Clerk doing the mail run and some Property, my school schedule was changing and I was considering whether I was going to have to find a different job. I was lucky then that I had met Bonnie King. I was able to transfer to Safety, Health and Environ-

ment and she worked around my school schedule and took me under her wing. While working for her, she taught me many things, and was always there to give me advice whether it was about health insurance, setting up my TSP, learning about Myers-Briggs personality types, or taking calculated chances. When I needed an internship for school, she worked with our Administrative Officer to convert me to the first SCEP position in the Area

Office. Even after I moved to Information Technology, Bonnie still gave me advice when I asked and acted as my informal mentor. I am forever grateful for her taking the time to help me, and today I consider her a friend. Someday I hope to pay her the biggest compliment I can think of, which is helping others as she has helped me. ♦

~ Heather Gossel

Kudos for Co-workers: **Jill Miller, Sidney**

I came on at the start of field season, a hectic time for most. And I came in green to the paperwork shuffle of government employment. Throw in being responsible for making sure a couple of "green" summer techs were trained for the work (along with myself) there was the paperwork! You know, time sheets, vehicle logs, travel forms, etc. Oh, did I forget to mention we also had to travel for work. Summer folks had to pay their own way and request reimbursement. Permanent employees had to fill out travel sheets. Anyway, most of you will

understand the paperwork and record keeping demands, and the rules and regs that go along with it. So, there I was, green from head to toe. Then there was Jill, as in Jill Miller, as in explainer of all things regulated, as in hand-holder for all people new (and some who had been around a while). Patient as a saint, she would explain things to me as though she hadn't already been through this ten thousand times (okay, I exaggerate a little). No eye rolling, no sighs, just straightforward helpfulness with the nicest demeanor I've ever encountered.

Always willing to stop what she was doing to help me out. And boy, did she help me. Seven years later she continues to help me, and the other people at the station. And she continues to do it with the most pleasant demeanor and with a smile. It's always nice to walk into work and see her smile, catch a wave hello, know she's there willing to help out. She's a great part of our team and life at work would change for me if she ever leaves. ♦

~ Mo O'Mara

SPECIAL SECTION – MORALE

Kudos for Co-Workers: Lisa Mullenax, Ft. Collins

When I first started working for ARS, one employee went above and beyond to help me learn everything I needed to know in order to succeed in the Federal workforce: Lisa Mullenax. She not only helped me understand the rules, regulations, and MANY acronyms I needed to learn, but she also taught me how to stay positive and always keep a great sense of humor no matter how stressful the day might feel. Those folks who have had the pleasure of working with Lisa know that

she is a very talented poet, so in her honor here is a short poem about her:

Leadership: she is a natural born leader & it's easy to see; she's definitely mentored many more people than just me!

Intelligence: she always has the answers we need, even if it's just planting a little thought seed.

Sense of Humor: she uses her witty comments to keep the office fun; feels

like without her NPA would not be able to run.

Amazing: co-worker, supervisor, employee & friend, a helping hand she's always willing to lend!

Thank you Lisa, for your endless support, advice, knowledge and motivation. You make us all better employees just by being around you! ♦

~ Shannon Robbie

Kudos for Co-Workers: William Dailey (retd.), Ft. Collins

Hats off to William J. Dailey (Retired) for his outstanding IT knowledge, problem solving ability and willingness to help. Early in my career, the late 1980's, technology was moving as fast, as it is today, only with GRASS GIS, HP mainframes, IBM pc's and SUN UNIX SPARC stations and I had to use them all to do science. Being fresh out college and only exposed to some of these machines/OS languages there was a lot to learn. There was no time to take in-depth courses on the technology as is the case now; you were expected to learn it on the job. I

learned all that was important from Bill to keep the data safe and processing and largely because of his extreme generosity with his knowledge and time. Even if he was busy with his own work and supervisor he would always stop to help unit employees with IT or get to you as soon as he could. He would work countless extra hours after work on system maintenance so all would be ready for us during the work day.

I don't recall him ever referring me to someone else; and, if he did not know

something he would always find out and come back with a solution. Because I had a very limited amount of time to work on science in the office he ran my backups on the day I wasn't there, saving me more time to do science. In recent times everyone must do their own back-ups. He made working for ARS his vocation and we all benefited from his dedication. Perhaps we burned him out; for he has left ARS far too soon with his talent. Thank You Bill! ♦

~ Anonymous

Kudos for Co-Workers: Linda Sundstrom, Area Office

Hats off to Linda Sundstrom for her in-depth expertise of the travel system rules and procedures and compassion for the traveler. Linda has always been efficient at her travel specialist duties while being respectful, kind, and amiable to coworkers. However, her proactiveness in the performance of her duties to assure that the traveling individual encounters as little difficulties as possible with their travel sets her apart as outstanding in her field. I can't imagine how challenging procedures must be when travel arrange-

ments must occur on funds among entities like other ARS locations, other Federal Agencies and countries providing in kind resources; but, Linda thinks about the person's experience as well as the paperwork. While waiting for the deployment date to Fema for Hurricane Wilma and not knowing the exact length of the deployment, Linda remembered personal charge limits on my travel card. She decided that they may not be high enough for the time I would be deployed. She immediately got a higher limit

approved before I left. The result was I had no issues with my card on deployment in a very stressful work environment where many other worries dominated; but, not financial ones. Another ARS employee from Ames, IA I worked with on the same deployment had their card denied for reaching the limit and was forced to put all the rest of her expenses on her private credit card. Thank You Linda! ♦

~ Anonymous

SPECIAL SECTION - MORALE

Kudos for Co-Workers: Bill Kemp, Fargo

I met Bill Kemp, Center Director in Fargo ND at the United Tribal Technical College (UTTC) intern recruitment session in Bismarck, ND. Bill spoke with me honestly about diversity issues within the USDA, the cultural shift that would be required of me in order to move to government work from academia, and the special challenges of working in the Northern

Plains. He encouraged me to read the book "Beyond the 100th Meridian" by Wallace Stegner and was an encouraging mentor at subsequent UTTC meetings. Bill suggested that I visit other NPA units, and I did so, giving talks and learning about the diversity of working environments within the USDA. The added perspective of how other units were run and how

scientists' work and intern recruitment differed among the units have been invaluable to me and have kept my approach to my own work creative and fresh. Bill might think the time that we spent talking was short, and it was, but it also greatly influenced my success as a new scientist within NPA. ♦

~ Erin Espeland

Kudos for Co-Workers: Mary Smith, Ft. Collins

Ever since I started my position five years ago, Mary Smith has always made herself available when a question arises in the lab and she is always honest in her answer. Mary has also lent herself to fill-in for days of strenuous field work when I have not been able to do so, even though she has knee and back problems. I believe

that all of my colleagues would agree that Mary is definitely a go-to gal! But most of all, Mary is the sweetest scientist you could ever wish to work with and a most dedicated friend. I recently went through a very rough patch in my life and Mary was always there, making an effort to find me in the lab or wandering around the

halls, to check in on me. At times, she was a shoulder to cry on, or on other occasions, a great cheerer-upper. Never the less, Mary has never failed to show me the awesome kindness that a newbie in the federal government needs. ♦

~ Alexandra Blevins

Kudos for Co-Workers: Mary Brodahl & Tom Trout, Ft. Collins

It's always good to know that you have someone there to show you the ropes, someone that can offer advice, or point you towards other knowledgeable people. I was extremely fortunate to have two sources to go to for any situation I needed help with. Mary

Brodahl and Tom Trout in the Water Management Research Unit, Fort Collins, were those people for me. Mary and Tom always provided me with nourishing information that helped me get the job done right. Although Mary has recently retired, I would like to recognize both

Mary and Tom for being outstanding, considerate, and helpful people. I would not be as confident and contented in my work here if I had not had the opportunity to work with them. ♦

~ Garrett Banks

Kudos for Co-Workers: Clay Center's Tissue Repository 'Army'

I can never express how much I appreciate all the people here who have helped to keep the tissue repository going. Here at USMARC, we have made it a policy to collect tissue from all the animals on center. In 2011, we collected over 58,000 samples. Blood from cattle, tails from pigs and ear notches from sheep are

collected after the animals are born and stored in a central location for all users to have access for research studies. I could never get everything done by myself. It is with the help of many people that syringes get prepped, tubes get labeled and the tissue collection takes place at various times during the year. In this case

it really does take an army. Much of this is done voluntarily with their supervisors permission and in many cases the supervisors are helping out also. I can't even try to thank everyone by name because I know there would be someone I would miss. ♦

~ Sam Nejezchleb

SPECIAL SECTION – MORALE

Common Threads that Forge Morale: Thoughts from Your Colleagues

By Theresa Pitts-Singer
 Entomologist, Logan, UT

Threads in the System

Government jobs are quite safe and secure jobs, at least most of the time. When the going gets tough for the national economy, fear of impending loss or change can undermine positive morale. Indeed, some laboratories do close, some people do lose their jobs, and some changes are implemented. On top of that, the general public is not afraid to lash out at federal employees. It is understandable that people feel scared and even become suspicious of what their superiors report to them and what actions they may take. Because there is little that most of us can do about the national system and the public's reaction to it, a negative effect on morale is imminent.

Furthermore, employees may feel constrained by a system of rules and obligations, not always understanding the significance of such rules. They feel that they cannot make a difference and are at the mercy of "the powers that be" that cast a shadow upon them. They may feel that the individual efforts and the skills that they contribute are underappreciated or not appreciated at all.

What specifically makes people feel the way they do about their government job may be hard to define. Think about your answers to the following questions, and then think about whether your perception is based on reality, fear, public opinion, hearsay, etc.

Do the following items impact your morale in a positive or negative manner? How much impact do they have? If you worked somewhere else, would you feel the same way about these items?

- your pay
- your location leadership
- the amount of paperwork required

of you

- talk about location closures, budget reductions, etc.
- your workplace atmosphere in general
- options and opportunities for career advancement in your current job or other jobs at your location, in the Area, or at other ARS sites
- whether or not you are allowed to participate in a flexible work schedule (i.e., credit leave, flexitour, maxi-flex, telework)
- recognition of your performance

Threads in the Workplace

You come to work each day, get your job done, and then you go home not knowing, or maybe not even caring, about what is happening at agency headquarters. For you, what affects your morale in the workplace is only what happens in your specific workplace. Some workplaces are more or less likely to be micromanaged or independent, share work with others or remain secluded, and socialize at work events or prefer to socialize outside of work. Some workplaces are more accepting than others in allowing for flexible hours and duties or for encouraging ideas and feedback on how to get things done or make change. The workplace model in which you work may or may not be a great fit for you.

How do you perceive the following items in the way that they affect your morale?

- ability to take time for family and/or personal concerns
- how management at your location has/has not taken any steps to address/acknowledge morale, such as:
 - organized employee social events
 - established regularly scheduled

staff meetings where time is allotted for discussing morale, or talking about morale in general

- implemented some sort of written communication process for addressing morale
- met individually with employees to discuss morale
- changed processes, behaviors, etc.

Threads at your Desk

Why do you come to work each day? What drives you to do your job effectively and timely? Does morale matter to you? What affects your personal morale? Every person brings something to the workplace table. What you bring can be positive, negative, or neutral. Unless you work alone, your very presence impacts others in some fashion.

On a personal level, you have at least some control over how the system and the workplace make you feel and how you perceive what is happening around you (is the glass half-full or half-empty?). How you are feeling may also affect the feelings of those around you. Despair, thanklessness, and fear of the unknown could be combated with a dose of hopefulness, gratitude, and reality-checking.

But who prescribes and administers the dose? Not everything about your workplace environment is within your control, and the environment can affect your morale. Think about your answers to the following questions, and consider if there are any avenues of action or change that you might take to maintain or enhance your personal morale or that of those close to you at your workplace.

- Has an employee or an employee group taken any steps to address morale among location employees' ability to take time for family and/or personal concerns?

Continued next page →

SPECIAL SECTION - MORALE

Threads....

Continued from page 10

- Has management at your location taken any steps to address/acknowledge morale?
- Are attempts to affect morale lauded, encouraged, attended, thwarted, or deemed unimportant?
- Have you personally taken action to improve your morale?
- Have you talked to others about how you are feeling about morale?
- Did you do something nice or say something "good" to say to another today? Did someone do or say something today that made you feel different about your job/workplace?
- If you made a list of what you like about your job and what you do not like, which one would "weigh" more? Do you think your perception of your job could change through self-assessment without tangible changes in the workplace?

Share Your "Threads"

Your NPA Diversity Task Force is interested in learning what sorts of other steps you think could be taken by yourself, other employees, location leadership/management, and/or Area location/management that could positively impact morale. We are most interested in learning employee's thoughtful views about what steps can be taken at the location and/or Area level that would positively impact morale.

Please send a (confidential) note to any member of the Diversity Task Force with any steps you think could be taken to maintain or improve morale. A complete list of Task Force members is found on page 21. ♦

Building Morale Since 1966

By Kristine Nichols
 Mandan, ND



NGPRL Technician, Faye Kroh, fills her plate at the annual corn-on-the-cob feed.



NGPRL employees and their families gather for a weekend sledding party.



Current and former NGPRL employees at a retirement pot luck.

Since 1966, the Employees Organization (EO) at the Northern Great Plains Research Laboratory in Mandan, ND has been an important component to employee morale. All personnel are included in this organization which provides multiple opportunities for employees to interact socially on and off location. The EO sponsors several noon lunches available for purchase, particularly in the summer time when employees are busy with field work and the staff includes many temporary employees. Lunch menus typically include grilled items (e.g. hamburgers, chicken, hot dogs, or brats), spaghetti, lasagna, chili, or soup, and chips, baked potatoes, salad, or carrots. Two of these events – a corn-on-the-cob feed and a pizza party – have become annual traditions and function as 'Thank You's'.

Proceeds from EO events and from the rental of vending machines and aluminum can recycling are used to purchase several appliances for general employee use, such as microwaves, refrigerators, coffee pots, a roaster oven, picnic table, and grills. Funds are also used to provide sympathy, congratulations, or get well cards to employees during life changing events and to host coffee or retirement parties for employees moving to new opportunities. In addition, the EO is involved in on and off campus pot lucks, picnics, and holiday parties as well as trash pick-up as part of the 'Adopt a Highway' program. ♦

Valuing Diversity and Deconstructing Unconscious Bias

By Barbara King

NPA ODEO Program Manager, Ft. Collins

The recent reorganization of ARS and the VERA and VSIP retirements all have contributed to a smaller NPA workforce. At the end of March 2012 NPA had 673 permanent employees, a decline of nearly 8% from FY11. The racial and gender demographics of the permanent workforce, though, did not change much in that NPA continues to be about 9% under-represented groups and two-thirds male.

While the “numbers” are important in any discussion on diversity, numbers are only one piece of the diversity mosaic. As Dr. Jin wrote in her article, diversity is composed of primary and secondary dimensions. The value of diversity, then, is the perspectives derived from our unique combinations of primary and secondary dimensions that each of us bring to our interactions. Jin’s article also noted Dr. Scott Page, a professor of complex systems, political science, and economics at the University of Michigan. For those of you who enjoy reading Malcolm Gladwell, I think you will find Page equally engrossing, entertaining, and persuasive.

Page, in his book *The Difference: How the Power of Diversity Creates Better Groups, Firms, Schools, and Societies*, provides a number of arguments showing that what drives innovation and problem-solving is our collective perspectives. The foundation of those perspectives are cognitive diversity (our ways of thinking) and identity diversity (differences in skin color, gender, or ethnicity). Page notes that as business went global, the key to understanding global implications was replacing homogenous hierarchies with teams composed of people having a wide variety of cognitive and identity diversity. The bulk of Page’s hefty book examines how diversity of perspectives almost always results in better outcomes in just about any situation. His book is full of well-documented examples and proofs, and well worth reading, for both skeptics and adherents of the value of diversity.

Dr. Jin, in her article, does a nice job of making the argument that this notion of cognitive and identity diversity has everything to do with ARS. The next focus

of this column is to try to unpack just why it is that our workforce is strong on cognitive diversity but not so strong on identity diversity.

Let’s start by going back to the “numbers.” NPA has historically had 8-9% of its workforce from under-represented racial and ethnic groups, with women holding fewer than 40% of the jobs (and upwards of 80% of women holding jobs in grades 12 and below), and fewer than 1% of our workforce having a targeted disability.

“The bulk of Page’s hefty book examines how diversity of perspectives almost always results in better outcomes in just about any situation.”

One explanation is that our local towns and communities are not especially diverse, so recruitments are less likely to generate applicants from under-represented groups. That may have been the case 10 years ago, but the 2010 census shows that nearly all of the NPA locations are in communities where the minority population is increasing. Also, the racial and ethnic diversity in NPA is generally in the higher grades, and especially in the SY cadre, so it would seem that communities, NPA locations, and jobs are attractive.

Another explanation gaining traction in recent years is the concept of unconscious bias. The foundation of unconscious bias is that people make decisions every day in any number of situations and that many if not most of the important decisions any of us make are based on beliefs, attitudes, stereotypes, etc. that are automatic and unconscious.

Most people are most comfortable with people who are like them, and much of that comfort level is unconscious. For instance, although America is multi-racial, multi-cultural, with many religious beliefs/non beliefs, etc., we remain a

fairly segregated society by choice. Think about your neighborhood, your place of worship, civic organizations you belong to, your children’s school, or your friends, and co-workers. How diverse is any one of those by race, gender, age, religion, class, etc.? Imagine you are attending a conference or social event for the first time and don’t know anyone else there. How do you decide whom to approach to strike up a conversation with, or sit by? Someone of the same gender? Same race? Same general age? How comfortable or uncomfortable are you with going up to someone who at least visually doesn’t seem to share any or many of your same characteristics?

Consider how unconscious bias might occur during a recruitment process and review of applicant materials. Researchers at MIT and the University of Chicago found that even when companies said they were seeking diversity, resumes with “typically white names” received more call-backs than did resumes with “typically black names.” How does that happen? The numbers seem to speak for themselves – something besides measuring talent happened in that research project where nearly 5,000 resumes were mailed to employers [1].

When our frozen vacancies are released for recruitment, and if you serve on a panel or have other opportunities to contribute comments or input to a search, keep in mind that cognitive diversity and identity diversity add real value to workgroups, and that unconscious bias can be a powerful barrier to finding the best candidate. ♦

Endnotes:

[1] Bertrand, Marianne and Mullainathan, Sendhil, *Are Emily and Greg More Employable than Lakisha and Jamal? A Field Experiment on Labor Market Discrimination*, Univ. of Chicago Graduate School of Business, NBER and CEPR; MIT and MBER 2003

To learn about what sorts of unconscious bias you might have, take 15 minutes or so and take one or more on-line implicit bias assessments from the Implicit Bias research group. These assessments are based on sorting and measuring the time it takes to respond to paired concepts.

Matters of Diversity and Why Diversity Matters

By Virginia L. Jin
 Soil Scientist, Lincoln NE

We are inundated daily with issues related to diversity. Whether in the news and entertainment media, in educational settings, or at the workplace, matters of diversity and inclusion have become a major component of American life. As well it should. Since the first U.S. census, the Nation's population more than doubled from 152 million persons in 1950 to 310 million persons in 2010. As our Nation has grown, it has also become older and more diverse. Between 1995 and 2025, the number of people aged 75 years and older will double in 21 states. And by 2056, it is projected that there will be no single majority group in the United States [1].

So then, what is meant by diversity in the workforce? Diversity simply refers to differences among people. Matters of diversity and inclusion are not limited to just race or gender – it has come to encompass many different dimensions, both primary and secondary (Figure 1; adapted from [4]). Primary dimensions include “unalterable” traits that are beyond our control (age, race, ethnicity, etc), whereas secondary dimensions include factors that we have some degree of control over (work background, marital status, education, etc).

Each individual harbors a unique mix of both primary and secondary diversity traits, contributing to the overall richness of perspectives and cognitive skills in our human resources. Secretary Vilsack's Cultural Transformation initiative targets the maximum utilization and cultivation of our resources, most especially our human resources, to enhance the agency's ability to provide leadership on food, agriculture, natural resources, and related issues.

It is a human tendency for people (customers, stakeholders) to feel a connection with someone they can relate to, so the most effective way to serve a diverse customer marketplace is to have a work force that mirrors its diversity [6]. The goal of diversity training is to take advantage of cultural differences and use those diverse perspectives to be creative, innovative, and globally

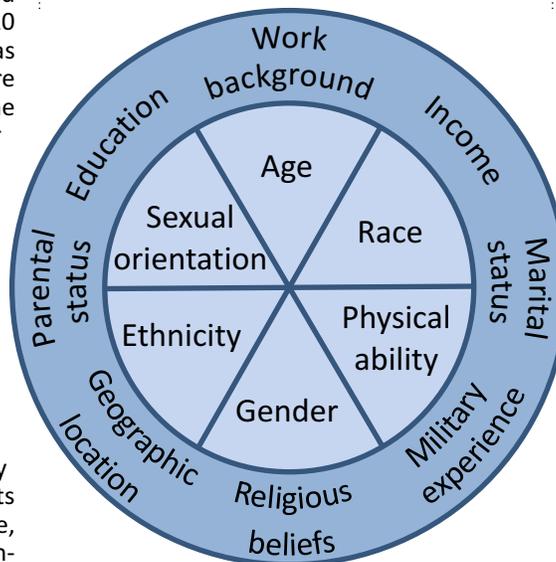
relevant. Too often, however, diversity training focuses on raising awareness without explicitly linking diversity to collective problem-solving within the workplace [9].

Diversity in how people think, or cognitive diversity, has a direct impact on organizational performance and productivity [8]. Differences in identity, gender, race, ethnicity, culture or physical ability often correlate with how we think about and perceive problems [8]. In this context,

diverse tools are the most successful at solving those problems. In other words, teams of intelligent and diverse problem solvers outperform teams composed of the best individuals. Why? Because greater diversity confers the best performing teams with the most tools and the most creative ways of combining them. We've seen this increasingly in our own research fields through the formation of large, interdisciplinary teams that collaborate to address and solve difficult agricultural problems.

Another property of workforce diversity is its predictive power [9]. Consider the case of the 1906 West of England Fat Stock and Poultry Exhibition [10]. 787 fairgoers were asked to guess the weight of a steer. The average guess was 1,197 pounds. The actual weight of the steer was 1,198 pounds. Each individual missed the actual weight of the steer by an average of 55 to 60 pounds, but their collective accuracy was approximately -1 pound. In other words, the diversity of guesses from fairgoers mattered as much as their average abilities in predicting the weight of the steer. Now consider that the ARS has many agricultural research projects that are replicated in many areas of the country, maybe even internationally. Replication of experiments in diverse environments allows us to increase our predictive power of how agricultural management practices generally will impact agricultural productivity and/or sustainability. Similarly, workforce diversity confers greater predictive power in problem-solving.

The inclusion of diversity in our workforce today is not just about increasing respect and tolerance for differences. While those aspects are indeed important, workforce diversity is ultimately about improving the USDA-ARS's performance and ability to meet the agricultural needs of the Nation. As stated by the President in his Executive Order 13583, “[o]ur Nation derives strength from the diversity of its population and from its commitment to equal opportunity for all. We are at our best when we draw on the talents of all parts of our society, and our greatest accomplishments are achieved when diverse perspectives are brought to bear to overcome our greatest challenges [11].”



Primary and secondary dimensions of diversity.
 (adapted from [4])

differences do not equate with deficiencies [4]. Dr. Scott Page, a political science and economics professor at the University of Michigan, has written extensively on diversity and has presented empirical evidence suggesting that diverse groups outperform homogenous groups in any number of settings and situations, and further postulates that diversity often trumps ability [8]. Page compares the concept of cognitive diversity to a toolbox. Consider that each person with their unique set of primary and secondary diversity traits possesses a unique set of cognitive tools. On any given problem, the best individuals tend to have many tools, but also tend to have very similar tools. When faced with a multifaceted problem (such as those in agricultural research), individuals with the richest network of collaborators who can provide

Continued next page →

Matters of Diversity... *Continued from page 5*

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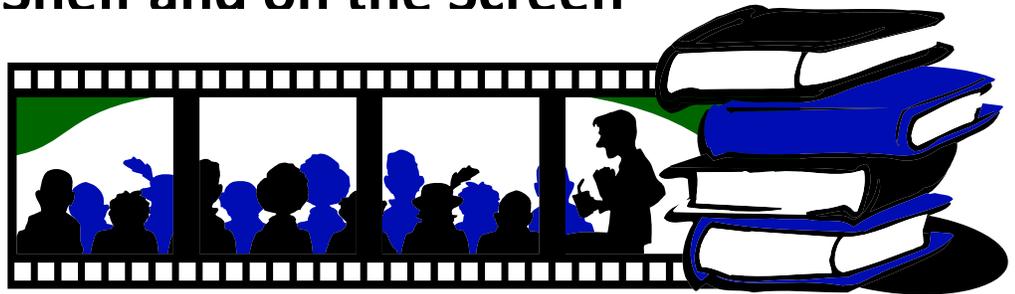
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Diversity - On the Shelf and on the Screen

Editor's note: "On the Shelf and On the Screen" provides reviews of books and videos that deal with diversity as another means of learning about diversity. We invite you to contribute your recommendations for inclusion in future editions of "Voices" – simply email your recommendations with a short description to:

NPA-DTF@ars.usda.gov



FILM REVIEW

"Made in Dagenham"

Review by Barbara King
 Fort Collins, CO

Think back to the summer of 1968 in America: the assassinations of Dr. Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy; the daily front-line reporting from Viet Nam on the evening news; the violent anti-war protests at the Democratic Convention in Chicago; and the emergence of the Women's Liberation Movement. Life in America was anything but calm.

In contrast, across the "pond," life was relatively calm, that is until the women machinists at a Ford assembly plant in Dagenham, England went on strike on June 7, 1968 seeking pay parity with male machinists. The jobs of women machinists, who sewed upholstery and door panels, were categorized as unskilled compared to male machinists who did

comparable work but were considered skilled and paid considerably more than women. The story was turned into a movie entitled "Made in Dagenham" and was released in 2010.

This British film captures the camaraderie of the women who had the conviction to strike to achieve equal pay with men. Initially, women were unhappy with their situation but felt powerless. Through the coaxing of "Albert" and the emergence of "Rita O'Grady" as their leader, women felt empowered to walk out. While the strike was initially met with humor and incredulity, and later with outright hostility and derision, the women prevailed and the strike widened to include other women machinists, and even a march on London. The strike closed the factory, throwing men out of work as well. An agreement was eventually negotiated through the intervention of Barbara Castle, the British Employment Minister, and was an impetus for the Equal Pay Act in 1970.

This film is a joy to watch, and I couldn't

help but find myself cheering for the women and their stalwart shop steward, "Albert" who encouraged the women and challenged Ford management and the union management who were determined to maintain the gender pay scales.

The character of "Rita" is especially moving, as she moves from reluctant organizer to forceful spokesperson. The film captures the plight of working women and the impacts the strike had on men, and candidly shows the class divisions, social and corporate barriers faced by women, and the financial hardships they and their families faced as the strike progressed.

This energizing movie shows how the collective spirit of a dedicated group of people can change long-held assumptions and business/social practices, and shape a better life for themselves, their families, and society. I loved this movie and recommend it for the story, the humor, and the opportunity to kick back and relive some of the heady days of the late sixties. ♦

100 Years of Research at NGPRL

By Kris Nichols
 Soil Microbiologist, Mandan, ND

The Northern Great Plains Research Laboratory (NGPRL) in Mandan, ND is celebrating 100 years of research this year. At the beginning of the 20th century, homesteaders were moving fast into the northern Great Plains, and they needed to know how to protect their homes and livestock from the harsh winter weather and to grow vegetables, fruits, and grains in a limited rainfall environment. In response to these needs, the Mandan community petitioned Congress to create an agricultural research facility in the area.

The first scientific staff included horticulturalists, agronomists, foresters, and a pomologist (i.e. someone who cultivates fruit trees). This staff was charged with develop farming practices and identify plants that would help farmers and ranchers deal with the harsh conditions of wind, drought, and extreme temperatures common to the region and testing trees for hardiness and growth potential. This research lead to the establishment of long-lived trees for shelterbelts and the development of hardy fruit trees, grapes, vegetables and ornamentals along with flax and cereal breeding and management.

Initially, the station was self-sufficient with two residences for the superintendent and his assistant and two smaller cottages and several apartments for the professional staff, and a bunkhouse for the workers. Employees were fed in the Station's cafeteria and used its own produce, milk, and beef. Two root cellars were stocked with ice from the nearby Heart River and provided storage for food and trees for windbreak plantings in North and South Dakota, Montana, and Wyoming.

Over the years, NGPRL continued to grow and research included a dairy unit, beef production, tree and grass nurseries, plant pathology, irrigation, and soils. New varieties of grasses for reseeding eroded areas formed during the Dust Bowl



A 2009 landscape view of NGPRL and one from 1914.

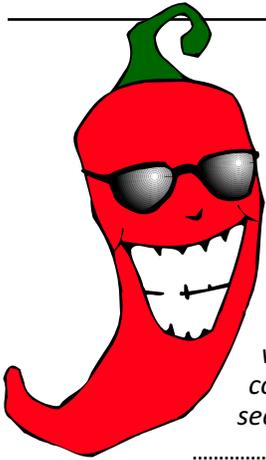


were developed including 'Nordan' crested wheatgrass, 'Lodorm' green needlegrass, and 'Vinall' Russian wildrye. By the early 60's, the fruit tree and ornamental program had released new cultivars of apple, apricot, plum, and crabapple trees, tomatoes, corn, and geraniums. Soils research increased in the areas of soil and water conservation, soil nutrient cycling, and preventing saline seep formation. In the 1970s, plant science research expanded to include grassland management, forage breeding and nutrition, plant physiology, and mine-land reclamation. More grass cultivars were released in the 80's and 90's such as 'Manska' and 'Reliant' intermediate wheatgrass and 'Rodan' western wheatgrass along with 'Cardan' green ash and 'Oahe' hackberry trees.

Field-scale conservation tillage and cropping systems research was made possible by the creation of the Area IV SCD Research Farm in 1984 with the support of the local Area IV Soil Conservation Districts. Today, this 420-acre farm along with about 1900 acres of rangeland supports research in the areas of cropping systems, integrated crop-livestock systems, plant physiology, soil quality, trace gas emission, carbon sequestration, soil microbiology, rangeland management, and healthy beef. The laboratory has a nationally and internationally recognized reputation with

scientists invited to speak and share research in Australia, Uruguay, Germany, France, Russia, and the Ukraine. It also has been recently selected as a Long-Term Agroecosystem Research site due to its long history in cropping and rangeland research. Historic pastures have been in continuous management – one since 1916 and others since the 1930's. Other long-term studies include a 12-year integrated crop-livestock project and an 18-year cropping systems trial. Samples are available for other scientists to analyze from all these experiments along with historic soil samples stored in an archive which dates back 90 years. ♦

Author's Note: My thanks to Dr. Al Frank, Plant Physiologist-Retired, and Cal Thorson, Technical Information Specialist, for providing background information for this article. If you would like to read more about the history of NGPRL, please take a look at *The Taming of the Prairie: Nearly a Century of Agricultural Research at the Northern Great Plains Research Laboratory* by Dr. Frank.



LIGHTEN UP!

This issue's "Lighten Up" section takes a peek at several NPA employee "cook-offs." Four fab labs - Akron, Fargo, Sidney and the Area Office - conducted chili cook-off competitions this past year as a way to enjoy a yummy lunch and also raise spirits over the long winter. Below is a glimpse into those contests. And for a special treat, the winning recipes are featured in this edition's "Taste of the NPA" section immediately following. Enjoy!



Fargo cook-off winners from left to right: Joe Rinehart (red chili-3rd place), Brenda Fradet (white chili 3rd place), Dawn Feltus, Jonathan Neubauer, and Kurt Rudolph (red chili 2nd place).

FARGO, ND

In Feb 2, 2012 the RRVARC in Fargo, North Dakota held its 5th annual chili cook-off. Initially held in late January as a respite from the long Fargo winters, it was later moved to Feb 2nd to coincide with Groundhog's Day. A normal year features over fifteen unique entries, as well as a variety of accoutrements, with white and red division trophies awarded by popular vote. Since 2010, the event has been held in memory of Charles Koesterman, Fargo's beloved IT specialist who dominated the early years of the event with his amazing concoctions. ♦

~ Joe Rinehart, DAOC Chair RRVARC

SIDNEY, MT

The Sidney location loves to eat and likes to spice things up with a little friendly competition. Consequently, cook-offs are lively and frequent affairs at this location replete with a traveling trophy.

In addition to the lab's February chili cook-off, this group has celebrated "Pi Day" (on March 14, of course) with a pie contest; welcomed spring in April with a breakfast and egg decorating contest, and began the winter with a lasagna bake. Talk is there'll be an economical casserole competition for May's ARMPS meeting! ♦



Above: Technicians Laura Senior and Kim Mann put their scientific skills to work to determine the most flavorful chili offering at the Sidney lab's chili cook-off Feb. 2. **At left:** Winner of the rhinestone spatula traveling trophy was Cheryl Olson, who obviously came prepared.





LIGHTEN UP!

Continued from page 16

FT. COLLINS, CO

The NPA Area Office held the “Annual Souper Bowl Party” soup/chili cookoff the Friday before the Super Bowl. Employees are invited to sport their favorite “team” jersey, break out their culinary skills, and test their knowledge with a Super Bowl trivia quiz. Out of the 6 “souper” delicious entries, Elisa Dawdy’s Green Chile Chicken Tortilla Soup garnered the most votes, and Bryan Kaphammer won the trivia quiz. In addition to the soups and chilis, other dishes provided by employees included salads, breads, chips, salsas, beverages, and desserts. A true feast was enjoyed by all and the festivities put even the most football averse among us in the “soup bowl” spirit! ♦

Above: Elisa Dawdy proudly displays her winning soup and “winnings” (Broncos license plate holder and t-shirt – all things truly appreciated by this die-hard Dallas Cowboys fan and mom-in-waiting!). **At right (from left):** Mickey McGuire, Elisa “Cowboys” Dawdy, Bryan Kaphammer, Mark West, Jessica Wernimont, Molly Jackson, JoAnne Fernandez-Kniptash, Mike Wiggett, Hank “Broncos” Davis.



AKRON, CO

In what is now a tradition, the folks at the Central Great Plains Research Station carried out their yearly Chili Cookoff last February. This is a neat event and involves a tasting of the different chilis as well as a vote for the best one. It is a good occasion for fellowship and fraternizing, with good conversation over delicious food. The competition was won by Linda Hardesty, with Cody Hardy in a close second. ♦



Winning recipes can be found on pages 18-19

A Taste of the NPA - Our Award-Winning Chili Recipes!

Our thanks to all the chili contest winners featured in this edition's "Lighten Up" section for sharing their delicious recipes with us! Contributions came from **Dawn Feltus** and **Jonathan Neubauer** of Fargo; **Cheryl Olson** from Sidney; **Linda Hardesty** and **Cody Hardy** from Akron, and **Elisa Dowdy** from the Area Office in Ft. Collins. Go ahead and give them a try and see if you can pick a winner among the winners! ♦

FARGO, ND

Red Chili

Jonathan Neubauer, Fargo, ND

- 1lb ground beef
- 1lb ground turkey
- (1) 28oz can tomato sauce
- (2) 15oz can of diced tomatoes
- (1) can kidney beans
- (1) can chili beans
- (1) can garbanzos beans
- (1) medium onion
- (1) green pepper
- (1) yellow pepper
- (1) Anaheim chili pepper
- (6) cloves of garlic
- Chili powder to desired taste.

In a slow cooker add all of the beans, onions, garlic, peppers, tomato sauce, and tomatoes (holding back some of the onions and garlic to flavor the meat). As the meat is cooking, season with some onions, garlic, and chili powder. After meat is cooked and grease drained off add to the slow cooker. Wait 30min to 1hr of cooking (slow cooker on high), taste and add more chili powder to your preferred taste. Enjoy!

White Chili

Dawn Feltus, Fargo, ND

- 2 onions, chopped
- ½ cup butter (divided)
- ¼ cup flour
- ¾ cup chicken broth
- 2 cups half-and-half
- 1 can navy beans (drained)
- 2 cans northern beans (drained)
- 5 chicken breasts, cooked and shredded
- 2 (4 oz) cans chopped green chilies
- 1½ tsp. cumin
- 2 tsp. chili powder
- 1 tsp. ground red pepper
- 1 ½ tsp. salt
- ½ tsp. pepper
- 1 ¾ cup pepper jack cheese, shredded
- ½ cup sour cream

In a dutch oven, cook onions in 4 tbs. butter until soft, remove onions and set aside.

In same pot, melt remaining butter on low and add flour, stirring continuously to make a roux.

Stir in onion, then gradually add broth & warmed half-and-half, whisking constantly.

Bring mixture to a boil, and then simmer.

Stir in red pepper, chili powder, cumin, salt, pepper, beans, chicken, and chilies. Simmer for approximately 30 minutes, stirring occasionally.

Add cheese and sour cream and simmer for another 15 minutes.

Note – season to taste, can add more or less of each seasoning depending upon your preference. Chili may need additional ¼ cup of chicken broth if it's too thick.

FARGO, ND

Cheryl's Chili

Cheryl Olson, Sidney, MT

- Brown and drain:
- 1 lb ground pork
 - 1 lb mild Italian sausage

- Add to meat when browning:
- 1 onion, chopped
 - 4 garlic cloves, minced

- Add:
- 1 can crushed tomatoes
 - 1 can tomato sauce
 - 1 can small kidney beans

- 1 box chicken broth
- 1 box melted cream cheese, add last
(or try the new cream cheese sauces in zesty garlic)

- Salt and pepper to taste
- 2 tsp ground cumin, approx.

Let simmer so flavors can blend well.

Variations:

I like spicy, so I would use spicy (hot) Italian sausage, or a little bit of crushed red pepper. I also use Montreal steak seasoning and kosher salt for the salt and pepper.

SIDNEY, MT

A Taste of the NPA....

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Chicken Chili

Linda Hardesty, Akron, CO

- 11 tbsp Butter
- 1 3/4 c finely chopped Celery
- 1 cup finely-chopped Onion
- 1 cup finely chopped Green Sweet Pepper
- 3 cloves Garlic, minced
- 2 cans (15.46 oz each) great Northern, or white beans rinsed and drained
- 2 cans (14 oz each) Chicken Broth
- 1 cup Salsa (I use medium)
- 3 cup cubed cooked Chicken or Turkey
- 2 tsp ground Cumin
- 2 Bay Leaves
- 3-4 cup Half & Half, light cream, or whipping cream
- 2 tbsp cornstarch
- Salt and Pepper to taste

Directions:

Melt butter over medium heat. Add celery, onion, sweet pepper and garlic, cook until tender.
 Add beans, broth, 1 cup salsa, chicken, cumin and bay leaves.
 Bring to a boil over medium-high heat; reduce to simmer.
 Cook, uncovered, for 10 minutes.
 Combine half & half and cornstarch. Stir well, add to chili. Cook and stir for 2 minutes longer.
 Season to taste with salt and pepper.
 To serve, remove bay leaves; discard. Ladle chili into soup bowls. If desired, garnish w/more salsa, sliced scallions and cheese.

Makes 8 servings. Enjoy!

AKRON, CO

NOTE: Linda Hardesty's recipe (above) was the top vote-getter at Akron, but Doug Hardy's offering (at right) was a very close second.

AKRON, CO

Mesquite Smoked Turkey Chili

Cody Hardy, Akron, CO

- 3 lbs Ground Turkey
- 3 Large Sweet Onions
- 1 Red Bell Pepper
- 1 Green Bell Pepper
- 2 16 oz. Cans Peeled Crushed Tomatoes
- 1 Can Tomato Sauce
- 1 Can Tomato Paste
- 4 Cloves Garlic
- 1 16 oz. Can Dark Red Kidney Beans
- 1 Can Pinto Beans
- 2 tbsp Brown Sugar
- 1 tsp Salt
- 2 tsp Coarse Pepper
- 6 tbsp Chili Powder
- 3 tsp Cumin
- 1 Can Black Beans
 (add to chili once you move it to the crockpot)

Directions:

Mix 2 cloves garlic with the Turkey meat and season with salt & pepper to taste. Place meat in aluminum pan and into smoker grill @ 1800.
 Stir often so smoke gets into meat.
 Chop up veggies and place them into individual aluminum pans. Rinse the kidney beans and pinto beans and mix them with the one 16oz, can of crushed tomatoes in an aluminum pan.
 Put all pans in the smoker with the turkey meat. Put the remainder of the chopped garlic on a piece of foil and on the smoker. Again, stir frequently to make sure smoke gets into the veggies and beans.
 After 45 mm remove peppers and increase temp to 230°. Smoke for another 1.5 hours.
 Remove everything and begin mixing it all together in a 6 quart crock pot (here is where you add one can of black beans).
 Add the spices, brown sugar, tomato sauce and paste.
 Slow cook in crockpot on low for 12 to 14 hours while stirring occasionally.

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Ft. COLLINS, CO

Green Chile Chicken Corn Tortilla Soup

Elisa Dowdy, Ft. Collins, CO

- 2-4 Large Chicken Breasts
- 1 Large block of Mexican Velveeta or 2 small blocks
- 1 ½ cups of roasted, chopped Green Chile
- 1 12 oz. can of Evaporated Milk
- 1 10 ¾ oz. can of Cream of Mushroom Soup
- 1 10 ¾ oz. can of Cheddar Cheese
- 6-8 Corn Tortillas
- 1 15 ¼ oz. Can of Whole Kernel Corn

- 1)Cut chicken breasts into bite size pieces and sauté them in butter until fully cooked and then set aside.
- 2)Flash fry corn tortillas in oil, no more than 30 seconds on each side so they remain soft. Pat oil off of the

- tortillas with a paper towel then chop into bite size pieces and set aside.
- 3)Cut Mexican Velveeta into small equal size pieces.
- 4)In a large pot combine Cream of Mushroom Soup, Cheddar Cheese and 1/3 of the Evaporated milk and stir till thoroughly mixed.
- 5)Add the Velveeta pieces to the pot and cook on low, stirring frequently, until the Velveeta is completely melted. (It is very easy to burn this mixture)
- 6)Add the corn, corn tortillas, green chile and chicken to the cheese mixture and continue to cook on low for about 30 minutes.
- 7)Use remaining Evaporated Milk to thin the soup to your desired consistency.
- 8)Serve and enjoy!

Bonus Recipe!



Jill Miller and her bejeweled award.

Included here is another award-winning recipe, this one a dessert from Jill Miller at the Sidney, MT location. Jill was the winner of the “Pi(e) Day” contest held March 14. Bakers at the Sidney lab competed for top honors and bragging rights during a special coffee hour beginning at 3:14 that afternoon. ♦

Key Lime Pie Bars

Jill Miller, Sidney, MT

- 1½ cups crushed graham crackers
- 2 tablespoons sugar
- 1/3 cup butter, melted
- ½ cup sweetened flaked coconut
- ½ tsp coconut extract
- 3 large egg yolks
- 1 tablespoon finely grated lime zest
- 2/3 cup Nellie & Joe’s Famous Key Lime Juice
- 1 can sweetened condensed milk (14 oz.)
- ½ cup sour cream
- 2 Key limes, thinly sliced into half-moons or toasted coconut (optional garnish)

Directions

1. Make crust: Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Stir together the first 5 ingredients in a small bowl. Press evenly onto bottom of an 8-inch square glass baking dish. Bake until dry and golden brown, about 10 minutes. Let cool completely on a wire rack. (Leave oven on.)

2. Make filling: Put egg yolks and lime zest in the bowl of an electric mixer fitted with the whisk attachment. Mix on high speed until very thick, about 5 minutes. Reduce speed to medium. Add condensed milk in a slow, steady stream, mixing constantly. Raise speed to high; mix until thick, about 3 minutes. Reduce speed to low. Add lime juice; mix just until combined. If the mixture is too tart, add ¼ to ½ cup white granulated sugar.

3. Spread filling evenly over crust using a spatula. Bake, rotating dish halfway through, until filling is just set, about 10 minutes. Let cool completely on a wire rack. Refrigerate at least 4 hours (or overnight).

Cut into 2-by-2-inch bars. Put cream in the clean bowl of an electric mixer fitted with the clean whisk attachment. Mix on medium-high speed until stiff peaks form. Garnish bars with whipped cream and a slice of lime or toasted coconut.

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Where in the NPA? - Answer Key
 The USDA-ARS Northern Great Plains Research Laboratory in Mandan, ND is the modern site of this 1914 picture.
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