

**NORTHERN PLAINS AREA
Policy Memorandum**

DATE:	October 12, 2011
SUBJECT:	Recruitment Procedures for Cat 1, Cat 4 Scientists, Research Leaders and Center Directors - Northern Plains Area
NUMBER:	PM-04-002
EFFECTIVE DATE:	Immediately Until Replaced or Superseded (Replaces PM-04-002 dated August 11, 2009)

Purpose

The recruitment of a scientist, to fill a gap within a specific unit or to fill a leadership role, is one of the most crucial and expensive decisions we make in pursuing our research programs. The process of identifying and selecting a scientist deserves as much thought and care as that given to selecting research objectives. Over a 30-year career, investment costs for a scientist can amount to more than \$10 million. In recognition of the critical role scientists play in the ARS/NPA mission and the tremendous costs associated with recruitment and retention of scientists, the Northern Plains Area has developed this policy for recruiting Category 1 and 4 Scientists, Research Leaders (RL) and Center Directors (CD). This policy encompasses similar recruitment procedures found in industry and higher education.

It is vital that each and every search be conducted thoroughly and fairly. This policy provides selecting officials with the tools to ensure thoughtful, consistent, and comprehensive recruitment planning and procedures in order to achieve our diversity goals while at the same time ensuring quality hires.

Although this policy is designed for the recruitment of scientists, this policy can also be adapted for recruiting any position.

Background

Due to the current demographics of the Agricultural Research Service (ARS) workforce, the recruitment and hiring of a diverse and highly qualified cadre of scientists is a major emphasis area for the Agency and the NPA. Scientific and leadership positions in the Agency are filled by means of three hiring authorities. In the General Schedule category, scientists are hired within the General Schedule system at the GS-11-15 level. RLs are hired at GS-14 or 15 level. The two other hiring authorities are the Senior Scientific Research Service (SSRS) and the Senior Executive Service (SES). Center Directors may be appointed using any of the three hiring authorities, and in rare cases, RLs may be hired under SSRS hiring authority.

Selecting Official

For Category 1 and 4 SY positions within a unit, the immediate supervisor is the selecting official, and the Area Director (AD) is the approving official. In cases of a SY position (non

RL) within a Center, the CD must concur with the selecting official's recommendation prior to forwarding the nominated individual to the AD for approval. For RL and CD positions, the AD is the selecting official. Once the AD selects the candidate, approval of the selection lies with the Associate Administrator of ARS. In cases of RL selections within a Center, the CD is the recommending official, the AD the selecting official, and the Administrator is the appointing official. Under the SES and SSRS authority, the AD is the recommending official, the Administrator is the selecting official, and the Secretary of Agriculture is the appointing official. In cases of a SES or SSRS selection within a Center, the CD and AD are the recommending officials.

Request to Recruit

The selecting official prepares a position description (PD) and sends it to the Area Director and National Program Staff. In the cases of RL positions within a Center, the development of the PD is delegated to the CD and sent to the AD for approval. In cases of non RL SYs within a Center, the CD must concur with the PD prior to forwarding to the AD. After approval of the PD, the selecting official submits a recruitment request through the Area Office to headquarters to secure formal approval to conduct a search.

Recruitment Process

Formal announcement: Once approval to recruit is obtained, the selecting official, in consultation with the human resources specialist will prepare the formal announcement. In the case of RL selections within a Center, the CD will work with the HR specialist. Specialized experience and selective factors must accurately reflect the needs of the unit and position, and should clearly describe what criteria are desirable. The selecting official (or CD, if applicable) should work closely with the HR specialist assigned to the vacancy to ensure that the PD meets criteria for the desired grade.

Advertising: The announcement should be sent to a variety of sources, including professional journals, professional organizations, university departments that offer degrees in the field sought, and universities that target underrepresented groups, as well as the ARS and OPM websites. The ARS recruitment office should be consulted for assistance with identifying sources. Vacancy announcements are advertised in consultation with the HR Specialist and in accordance with HR policy. Given short recruitment timeframes, the expectation is for the selecting official (or CD, as applicable) and the search committee to identify potential candidates in advance of position opening.

Consultation with Outreach, Diversity and Equal Opportunity (ODEO) Staff: A representative from the ODEO will discuss with the selecting official (or CD, as applicable) underrepresentation figures, strategies on how to design and conduct a search that will target underrepresented groups, and specific recruitment procedures.

Search Committee: Most successful applicants learn of the position through word of mouth and other networking activities. To build upon existing networks, the selecting official must form a search committee and assign another individual (e.g., senior scientist) to chair the committee. In the cases of RL selections within a Center, the CD shall be responsible for forming the search committee. The committee should be comprised of several individuals with ties to industry, university, state, and federal institutions, as well as a member of the

ODEO. Current ARS scientists may also be members of the search committee. Invitation of relevant NPLs is also encouraged. Size of the committee is not necessarily limited. Diversity within the search committee should be sought, not only in race, gender, and ethnicity, but also in educational preparation, scientific discipline, and knowledge of research. The chair will contact potential members of the committee to ascertain their interest in applying for the position; individuals interested in applying shall not serve on the committee. Meetings will be held face to face or by conference call; additional information (position announcement, this Policy Memorandum) will be communicated via email. The committee will focus on identifying individuals who possess the qualifications sought, and establishing a process to solicit potential candidates. Discussions of potential candidates shall be held internal to the committee, and confidentiality is expected. Committee members are encouraged to contact potential applicants directly, either through email or telephone. Committee members making such contacts should share this information with the chair who will follow up with additional information (e.g., announcement). It must be made clear that an invitation to apply by no means guarantees employment. **Committee members should not approach potential references about a prospective applicant to ensure the confidentiality of the individual.**

Selection Process

Evaluation Panel (EP): The selecting official is responsible for compiling the evaluation panel. In the case of RL selection within a Center, the AD will consult with the CD to identify the evaluation panel. Individuals who served on the search committee will not serve on the evaluation panel. Planning for this panel should be done before the certificate of eligible applicants is received. It is paramount that the panel be composed of individuals who are committed to hiring a diverse workforce and are willing to devote the necessary time and energy to the process. Additionally, where feasible, the panel should include members of underrepresented groups. In the case of RL positions, the AD or his/her designee (or CD, if applicable) will consult with the Western Services Branch Chief/Human Resources Division (HRD) or his/her designee in the development of the selection panel; and both parties will participate as non-voting panel members. The CD will serve as a non-voting member of the panel in cases of RL selections within a Center.

Evaluation panels should be limited to no more than seven voting individuals; larger panels tend to become logistically unwieldy. Potential panel members should be queried concerning conflicts of interest for anyone on the list of certified applicants. All panelists must sign and return the confidentiality agreement (Exhibit 1) and be available for all interviews and committee discussions.

Required/Voting:

- Panel Chair from ARS outside the Unit. The Chair should be someone in a position at the same or higher level (e.g. RL, CD, SSRS).
- Scientist from within the unit: This person will gather feedback on the candidates interviewed from unit staff and report to the evaluation panel during final deliberations.
- Stakeholder: This person will gather input from stakeholders and report to the evaluation panel during final deliberations.
- University partner representative.

Non-Voting:

- Selecting official
- Center Director (RL POSITIONS within a Center)
- Area Director or his/her designee (RL and CD POSITIONS)
- Western Services Branch Chief/HRD or his/her designee (RL POSITIONS)

Exclusions:

- No one within the current or past supervisory chain of anyone on the certificate will participate as a voting panel member (e.g., if an applicant for a RL job within a center is an employee of the center, the RL for that person must not serve on the evaluation panel).

Recommendation for candidates to interview:

- The initial screening of applicants is performed by the HR specialist who forwards a list of certified applicants to the selecting official. Note: Once the certificate is received, the selecting official must make a selection for the position by the due date prescribed by HR. This will require planning ahead of certificate issuance. HR will only issue the certificate when the selecting official is ready to interview.
- Evaluation panel members shall not make any reference checks.
- Screening matrices. The selecting official develops the screening matrices (one for pre-interview and one for during the interview, see Exhibits 2 and 3 for examples), based on the major duties and job requirements as outlined in the vacancy announcement. In the case of RL positions, the Western Services Branch Chief/HRD or his/her designee will be consulted. In the cases of RL selections within a Center, the CD will provide the first draft of the screening matrices. The screening matrices should focus on the relevant education, skill, experience and competencies needed to accomplish the work and should not focus on factors that are not job related. The matrices are finalized prior to reviewing any applications.
- The selecting official will “sanitize” the applications by removing social security numbers, birthdates, etc., and provide copies to each panel member. In addition, the pre-interview matrix and the announcement will be included with the applications.
- Each voting panelist will independently rank all applicants using the pre-interview matrix and recommend who to interview. A conference call with the panel may be necessary to reach consensus of the interview list. The panel’s recommendations are referred to the CD (in cases of RL selections within a Center) and the selecting official, who, in consultation with the chair, determines which applicant(s) to interview. When submitting recommendations of whom to interview, the written package must include the pre-interview matrix from each voting member. In the case of RL positions, the Western Services Branch Chief/HRD will be consulted concerning whom to interview.
- The panel chair will contact those selected for interviews to set up a time to conduct interviews.

Interviews:

Prior to the interviews, all panel members will receive written guidance about their roles and responsibilities. The panel chair should review the document entitled “Interviewing: A Practical Guide for Selecting Officials” (REE-HRD). On the day of

the first scheduled interview, the EP shall convene prior to the first meeting with the candidate. During this time, the EP chair with assistance from the Western Services Branch Chief/HRD or his/her designee (in cases of RL selections) will discuss confidentiality, proper and improper questions, what to look for in the Modified Behavioral Event part of the interview session (in cases of RL and CD selections), and the questions that will be asked of each candidate. The panel chair will provide guidance to each of the groups scheduled to meet with the candidates concerning appropriate questioning and confidentiality. Candidates' application package should be held in a secure location for interested staff to review. Copies should not be made nor should the applications leave the secure location.

Seminar: A seminar will be given by each candidate to the entire staff, stakeholders, and partners. For scientist positions within a unit, the subject of the seminar is at the discretion of the panel chair and the selecting official. For RL and CD positions, the seminar should have a general title of "My brief biographical sketch and vision for the Unit/Center." The seminar is typically scheduled for 30 minutes followed by a 30 minute session for questions and answers from the audience. Feedback via written forms will be solicited from each audience member and provided to the panel chair.

Evaluation Panel Interview Session: Following a brief break, the EP will convene with the candidate and enter an interview session. For scientists within a unit, the format will be at the discretion of the panel chair and selecting official, but must be similar for each candidate interviewed. For RL and CD positions, the session will be held in two parts. The first part is modified from the Behavioral Event Interview (BEI) format. The concept of the BEI is the assumption that the most reliable interview information on how a candidate will perform in the target position is to understand how the candidate has performed in past positions. Therefore, the primary emphasis in this part of the interview is having the candidate describe in detail a minimum of two past management experiences that reflect their ability to perform in the leadership position. A BEI attempts to uncover the candidate's past performance by asking open ended questions. Each question helps the EP learn past performance in a key skill area that is critical to success in the position. For each event (provided to each candidate in advance), the candidate will, in 10 minutes or less, describe the event, what needed to be accomplished, what action the candidate took, and what the outcome was. The EP will ask questions after each event is described. The second part of the interview is a question and answer session. A series of standard questions will be developed by the selecting official, (and CD in the case of RL positions within a Center) and the panel chair prior to the interview process. Each candidate will be asked all of the questions. Each panel member will be assigned one or more questions to ask. If clarification is needed, panel members may ask follow-up questions. Each panel member should complete the interview matrix (Exhibit 3). The panel will be dismissed for the day following this session.

Additional Staff Contacts: It is highly recommended that the candidate has time (at least 30 minutes) to meet separately with the scientific staff, the administrative staff, a stakeholder group, the union (if appropriate) and the technical staff within the unit/center. The Panel Chair and Western Services Branch Chief/HRD (in the case of RL selections) will instruct each group concerning proper questioning prior to the first candidate meeting. Each group or a spokesperson for each group will provide

written or oral feedback to the Panel Chair for each candidate identifying strengths and weaknesses.

Panel Recommendations to the Selecting/Recommending Officials: After the last candidate has interviewed with the panel, the panel will reconvene, minus the selecting official and other ad hoc members (in the cases of RL position, the Western Services Branch Chief shall remain) to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of each candidate and make a recommendation to the selecting official or, in the case of RL positions within a Center, to the CD. The EP will have available for their deliberation: their own evaluations of each candidate, the evaluations from each of the groups that met with each candidate, and feedback forms from the seminar. The charge for the EP is to determine whether each candidate is acceptable or unacceptable. For the acceptable candidates, the EP will document strengths and weaknesses. The panel may choose to rank the candidates based on suitability for the position. Again, the consensus process should be followed, but in those cases where the panel cannot reach consensus, the EP may vote for the most preferred candidate. In the rare case where someone cannot live with the panel decision, a minority report will be provided to the selecting official (or CD as applicable). Following the conclusion of the panel meeting, the ad-hoc members will return for a report of panel findings. All written materials, including the interview matrix, will be collected by the EP chair during the last panel meeting and turned over to the Selecting official, or, in the case of RL and CD positions, the Area representative. The panel will be dismissed with the reminder of confidentiality after the recommendations are made.

Post recommendation:

- Checking references: Following the interviews, the selecting official will conduct reference checks for all candidates deemed acceptable by the evaluation panel. This may be delegated to the CD in cases of RL selections within a Center. Candidates will be contacted for permission prior to references being contacted. Reference checks will be conducted in the same manner for all applicants deemed acceptable. In the case of RL selections within a Center, the CD will then provide a recommendation to the AD.
- The selecting official can either accept or reject the panel's recommendation. If the recommendation of the evaluation panel is rejected, the selecting official is expected to communicate with the panel chair (and/or CD as applicable) and the Area Director to work out issues to reach a final decision.
- If the recommendation is accepted by the selecting official, the name of the selectee is forwarded to the approving official.
- Once the finalist is agreed on, the selecting official should review with the approving official the offer package (salary, recruitment incentives, start date, etc.).
- In the case of a Research Leader selection, the AD consults with the Western Services Branch Chief/HRD or his/her designee on the finalist.

The Job Offer

Approval of tentative offer: The Area Director (and the ARS Associate Administrator in cases of Research Leader and Center Director selections), must approve the tentative offer before HRD is notified. Upon approval by the Area Director and ARS Associate Administrator, the selecting official contacts HRD to secure approval of the salary.

Tentative offer: The selecting official contacts the desired candidate, by telephone, and extends a tentative offer, which is often open to negotiation between the selecting official and the candidate. In cases of a RL selection within a Center, this may be delegated to the CD. Once the offer is agreed upon between the selecting official and the candidate, the selecting official submits the REE-11 along with the original certificate for the Area Director's approval.

Classification: In the case where a candidate is selected from outside the Agency for a Category 1 GS level position, a Research Position Evaluation System (RPES) ad hoc panel must review the scientist's case for classification to the proper GS grade. The responsibility for case preparation lies with the selecting official, though the Associate Area Director may be consulted. For SES, the Human Resources (HR) specialist performs a basic screening of applications and the resultant candidates are referred to an Executive Resources Board (ERB) to certify the applicants. The certificate is then issued to the recommending official for further peer evaluation. If the selected individual has not previously held a SES appointment or is not formally SES certified by Office of Personnel Management (OPM), the HR specialist forwards the candidate's materials to OPM for certification. For SSRS positions, the HR specialist performs a basic screening of applications and the resultant candidates are referred to the Qualifications Assessment Board (QAB) for eligibility determination. Eligible candidates may be referred to the recommending official for further peer review, or they may be referred directly to the selecting official. Once a candidate has been selected, they are recommended, through line management, to the Secretary of Agriculture for appointment. Veterans' preference does not apply to SES positions but does apply to SSRS and GS positions.

Recruitment Incentives: Consult P&P 412.5 for details on the types of available recruitment incentives. The selecting official has the option of extending recruitment incentives, provided that location funding is available and any of the following apply:

- Incentives are necessary to fill the position.
- The position is difficult to fill.
- The prospective candidate is receiving competing offers.

Recruitment incentives should not be considered if any of the following apply:

- There are an adequate number of qualified candidates for the position.
- A quality candidate will join ARS without additional incentives.
- A quality candidate will join ARS for an advanced in-step salary.

Official offer letter: Once the grade level is determined, the recruitment incentives negotiated and approvals are secured, HRD calls the selected candidate to offer the position officially and provides the official offer letter.

Maintain contact with new employee: The selecting official should take the lead in maintaining contact with the new employee and work with that employee to make the transition as seamless as possible. Assisting new employees with the transition to a new living and working environment is crucial to retention and successful job performance.

Record Retention

- The search committee chair shall provide the Selecting Official:
 1. Committee membership list
 2. Advertising sources
 3. List of potential candidates contacted
- Immediately following the interviews, evaluation panel members shall return the following documents to the evaluation panel chair:
 1. Candidate applications
 2. Completed matrices
 3. Any handwritten notes
- The evaluation panel chair returns the above documents to the Selecting Official. In addition, the panel chair provides the Selecting Official:
 1. Names of members of the evaluation panel
 2. Interview schedule
 3. Core questions (not answers) asked of candidates
 4. Written comments from the groups the candidates met with
 5. Seminar evaluation forms
 6. Written panel summary with recommendations
- The Selecting Official will retain these records as well as records of reference checks for a period of three years after the selection is made.

Probationary Period

The Selecting Official and supervisor, if they differ, should be aware of probationary period requirements in case discussions arise with potential applicants. In general, Category 4 and 6 employees must serve an initial probationary period of one year; Category 1 employees must serve an initial probationary period of 3 years; and new supervisors must serve a supervisory probationary period of one year. Probationary requirements are addressed in the formal employment offer from HR, and additional guidance may be found on the HR website.

Discrimination Statement

Persons carrying out the recruitment responsibilities as defined in this policy will not discriminate for or against any employee or candidate for employment on the basis of race, color, religion, national origin, age, sex, sexual orientation, disability, reprisal, marital/parental/familial status, political beliefs, receipt of public assistance, protected genetic information, or harassment.

Point of Contact

For further information, please contact the Area Director or Associate Area Director at 970-492-7057.

/s/
W.H. BLACKBURN
Area Director
Northern Plains Area

Exhibit 1

Each member of the Evaluation Panel must read and sign the Confidentiality Agreement stated below. If a member cannot sign the form, they will be excused from serving as a member of the panel.

USDA-Agricultural Research Service

Northern Plains Area

Confidentiality Agreement

I understand and agree that by serving as a member of this evaluation panel, that I will maintain complete confidentiality regarding the paper-screening/interview process. I understand and agree that I will not divulge to anyone any matters discussed as a part of the process, including discussions by panel members, written materials provided during the process, rankings, individuals selected or not selected for interview, etc. I understand that if I perceive inappropriate procedures are involved in the selection process, I may contact an NPA office representative to discuss my concerns. I understand and agree that if I receive calls or contacts from anyone requesting information from me regarding **any** part of the process, that I will refer those individuals to the NPA Director.

Special note for employees of ARS-NPA: I understand that if I fail to adhere to the above, I may be subject to disciplinary action.

By signing below, I acknowledge that I understand, agree with, and will comply with the above statements.

Name (Printed)/Signature

Date

Exhibit 2: Pre-Interview Matrix – Independent Panel Member Evaluation of Written Applications

Unit Name

Location

RATING

Minimally Qualified

Moderately Qualified

Highly Qualified

1

2

3

4

5

Name of Applicant	Selective Placement Factors (Fill in one per column)				TOTAL SCORE

Pre-Interview Matrix - Independent Evaluation – Rationale/Comments of Who to Interview

1	
2	
3	

Evaluated by: _____

EXHIBIT 3: Interview Matrix - Independent Evaluation of Applicant Interview

RATING

Minimally Qualified

Moderately Qualified

Highly Qualified

1

2

3

4

5

Candidate Name	Seminar Quality (including vision)	Response to Audience Questions	BEI 1	BEI 2	Response to Panel Questions	Input from location groups	Total

Evaluated by: _____

Rationale/Comments: