

# PASTG NEWSLETTER

Volume 1, Issue 3

## INFORMATION ON THE REE FOCUS GROUPS

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1. Agricultural Research Services (ARS)
2. Cooperative State Research, Education and Extension Service (CREES)
3. Economic Research Service (ERS)
4. National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS)

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Under Secretary Stauber appointed nine focus groups to identify issues and ideas on how to improve quality, relevance, and recognition of work within the REE mission. Two representatives from each of the five agencies under REE were chosen to serve on the Secretarial/Support Focus Group. Representing ARS were: Janet Ferst, Secretary to Administrator and Sherri Klokkenga, Secretary to the Midwest Area Director.

The group met in Washington, D.C. on December 6, 1995, to discuss three questions: 1) What would help you do your job better? 2) What would make your work more relevant to meeting your customer needs? And 3) What could be done to improve/increase awareness and recognition of your Agency?

From these three questions the following high priority issues were identified:

- ✓ Employee's lack of knowledge of REE organization structure, mission and purpose (need for training)
- ✓ Lack of uniformity in REE-wide automation
- ✓ Need for training
- ✓ Employee/Management inability to recognize secretarial/support staff as "professionals"
- ✓ Better working conditions
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- ✓ Proper usage of the Performance Appraisal System as a "management tool" and not as a "bonus review"

- ✓ Improved new employee orientation
- ✓ Need for improved communications amongst agencies - What are their accomplishments?

Final reports are now being prepared from the nine focus groups. Once these reports are reviewed, recommendations will be made on areas to follow-up on in more detail. Program result teams will be selected and will make more detailed recommendations on implementation of these changes to Under Secretary Stauber.

## **SELECTION OF NEW CIVIL RIGHTS MANAGER**

Sandy Brinson has been selected to serve as the Midwest Area's Civil Rights Manager. Sandy replaces Barbara Lamm in this capacity. Sandy brings a well rounded line of expertise to her new position. She has worked as a Personnel Staffing Specialist, Employee Relations Specialist, Labor Relations Specialist, EEO Counselor/Mediator/Manager and EEO Specialist.

Within the next few months, many of you will have the opportunity to interact with Sandy. Please feel free to contact her anytime to share your viewpoints regarding civil rights or to enlist her assistance. Sandy may be reached at 202-720-6161, or FAX 202-690-0109.

## **MIDWEST AREA ARMPS REVIEW**

The Midwest Area ARMPS review with the Administrator and Headquarters will be held on January 31, 1996. Dr. Dunkle, Dr. Hewings, and Mr. Steve Edney will be representing the Midwest Area at this review. Upon receiving approval of your ARMPS package from the Administrator, Dr. Floyd Horn, your management units ARMPS will be approved as final.

## **TIPS OF THE MONTH**

Before quitting for the day when working on an article or a project, write yourself a few notes on where to go next with the undertaking. This will make it much easier when you pick up the task again.

### When dealing with interruptions:

- 😊 Set a time with your boss when the two of you may meet without interruptions.
- 😊 Designate specific times for interruptions and other times for no interruptions. An example would be to put a sign on your door/desk that you'll be "available after 10:30." In time, co-workers will learn to understand that you require uninterrupted time.
- 😊 Learn to tell people you just can't talk now because you're working on something that must be completed soon.

Most importantly, the "*please*" and "*thank you*" of common courtesy go a long way. And, we would like to truly thank all of you for taking the time to enjoy this quarter's

Tips & Helpful Hints. If you have any ideas or suggestions you would like to include, please feel free to forward any information to Karen at ksussman@pilot.msu.edu or call 517-355-7456 or FAX 517-337-6782.

## **Internet Tips and Etiquette**

Brevity is the soul of e-mail. Remember it is easier to read a one-page/screen message than to scroll through numerous pages. Keeping messages short and to the point will almost always guarantee that the message(s) will be read

E-mail seems more rude than it is intended to be. Keeping this in mind will help you when creating messages. And, when writing, remember that using all CAPS in a message is the same as yelling at someone.

## **COMMENTS FROM *DIANE STRUB*, ON RECENT RMIS TRAINING.**

Recently two RMIS training sessions for new users were conducted at the Midwest Area Office in Peoria. At least one of the sessions was comprised of both Research Leader Secretaries and Location Administrative Officers who were new to the system or had been away from RMIS for a number of years. Pat Bothast, Marilyn Paul and Christy Gibson did an excellent job of conducting the training and sharing many helpful hints as well as providing some very good resource material for the attendees. Responses from those who attended were very favorable.

The training involved background information regarding CRIS, RMIS and policy which drives the need for the system. The opportunity for hands-on on-line RMIS training and interaction among the attendees along with interaction and input from the Area Directors and Area Administrative office Staff.

This training was beneficial to both by providing a great opportunity for secretaries and AOs to discuss needs, and exchange information

Secretaries discovered what a resource their LAO could be, not only with RMIS, but in various areas as well. The LAOs became aware of what useful information RMIS can provide, relative to the preparation, processing and monitoring of research agreements.

The consensus was that the training was very beneficial and should be considered as a refresher training for all RMIS users - both RL secretaries and LAOs.

*Diane Strub*, Administrative Officer, Madison, Wisconsin.



## **CONGRATULATIONS AND BIRTHDAY WISHES**

Congratulations to Jamie and Michelle Yoder, proud parents of Jesse Darren, born December 12th in Peoria, IL. Michelle works in the Library at the National Center for Agricultural Utilization Research.

Congratulations to Karen Sussman for graduating and receiving her Associates Degree in Business Information. Karen is the Secretary for the Sugarbeet & bean Research Unit, East Lansing, MI.

**AND FINALLY HAPPY BIRTHDAY WISHES TO ALL OF THOSE BORN IN THE MONTHS OF JANUARY, FEBRUARY, MARCH AND APRIL.**

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# **PASTG NEWSLETTER**

**Volume 2, Issue 1**

## **National Secretarial Advisory Council Meeting--Brief Report**

**June 10, 1996**

The National Secretarial Advisory Council met in College Station, Texas, May 29-30, 1996, for its 3rd annual meeting. Anne Steele, Secretary, Food and Feed Safety Research Lab, coordinated the meeting site and made hotel arrangements, plus scheduled tours of ARS facilities in College Station. The Southern Plains Area Task Group also convened during this same time frame and interacted frequently with us in development of their charter and goals for 1997. The National Council and Area Council then jointly met with the Southern Plains Area Director, Charles Onstad, and clerical staff for a round table discussion.

### **Agenda items for the full 2-day meeting included:**

- **Distribution of the "Partnership in Excellence" Program and the Training & Planning Guide to all Area councils and follow-up implementation**
- **Discussion on the Secretary of the Year Awards for each Area, and criteria developed for the award**
- **Development of an NSAC Newsletter to be published semi-annually**
- **Group brainstorming for an ARS Secretarial Handbook defining key chapters for the handbook to be sent to each Organizational Task Group for tailoring to Area needs (Handbook Subcommittee: Sandra Warren, Co-Chair, Sue Thornburg, Co-Chair, Kay Carr, Elaine McGuire, Mary Silva, and Joyce Smith)**
- **Development of a Home Page for Internet**
- **Formal report for Administrator's Council**
- **Tentative plans for a National Secretarial Training Conference**

**These items will be included in the Goals for 1997, as well as a formal report to be forwarded to Jane Giles and Headquarters Staff.**

### **National Council members are:**

*Elaine McGuire, Beltsville, MD*

*Sandra Warren, Stoneville, MS*

*Joyce Smith, Wyndmoor, PA*

*Sue Thornburg, Fort Collins, CO*

*Libby Fouse, Fresno, CA*

*Kay Carr, Tifton, GA*

*Anne Steele, College Station, TX*

*Angie Marchetti, Greenbelt, MD*

*Mary Silva, NAL, Beltsville, MD*

*Carmela Carrick, NPS, Beltsville, MD*  
*Queen Spriggs, HQ, Washington, D.C.*  
*Marcia Jenkins, Peoria, IL*  
*Cecelia Stortzum, Technical Advisor, HRD, Greenbelt, MD*

## **Recent PASTG Meeting**

We recently held our annual Program Administrative Support Task Group Meeting in Ames, Iowa. The Task Group would first like to thank Lori Wilson-Voss, and Sue Ohlendorf for hosting this years meeting.

**The Task Group covered a lot of ground this year. Some of our major items were:**

- **Establishment of the "Issue Sheet"**
- **Review of Mentor/Training Program**
- **Review of Goals and Accomplishments of Task Group.**

Attached is the "Issue Sheet" which was established at the meeting, below you will find Dr. Dunkle's response to our recent meeting, and also the Area Directors response to the issues that were raised at the meeting.

**May 29, 1996 memo from Dr. Dunkle: Drs. Hewings, Gerloff and myself had the opportunity to visit with Marcia and Sherri concerning your meeting last week. It appears that the meeting was productive, generating many good ideas and suggestions. I am pleased to say that the Directors will accept the following recommendations:**

1. **Mentoring Program - We support and will implement the suggestion that all new secretaries to the Midwest Area will be provided a Mentor for a one year period of time. We are delighted that the members of the Task Group are willing to serve as mentors in order to get this program initiated.**
2. **Issues Paper - We endorse the use of the Issues paper to convey concerns of our secretarial/clerical support group to the Area. Please disseminate the form to the people you represent for their use. Attached is our response to the Issues you presented for Area consideration.**
3. **Additional Meeting of the PASTG - We also support the additional meeting recommendation of the PASTG. This will be an opportunity to keep the momentum of the group going and provide an opportunity for you to address issues in a timely manner.**
4. **Newsletter - We are pleased that you will continue to use the newsletter to distribute information. The format you are adopting may generate more input from the Area.**
5. **Quarterly Conference Calls - We will support the groups intention to discontinue conference calls. However, we encourage you to revisit this issue at a later date.**

6. **Internet Addresses/Home Page** - We will have a mailbox set up at the Area when the addresses have been accumulated. This will aid our office in transmitting information to the secretaries in a more timely manner. As soon as everyone has the capabilities to access Internet we encourage you to set up a Home Page for your group.

## **AREA DIRECTOR RESPONSE TO ISSUES PAPER**

***Issue #1:*** Lack of training dollars provided for clerical positions.

***Recommendation:*** The Area office has always supported training of all employees to enhance their job performance. The Directors will work with each RU during the upcoming ARMPS cycle to assure that adequate money is set aside to provide training. In addition, we will encourage supervisors/employees to utilize the IDP in identifying training needs.

***Issue #2:*** Standard operating guidelines for secretarial/clerical positions.

***Recommendation:*** We concur with the recommendation from the PASTG and are requesting that you take the lead in developing Area SOP/Guidelines. Please be prepared to brief our office during your October/November meeting of your progress.

***Issue #3:*** Lack of training provided to supervisory personnel, i.e. communication skills, people skills, etc. ***Recommendation:*** The Area is planning a RL meeting for next spring to target these issues.

***Issue #4:*** Lack of information provided to unit secretaries. ***Recommendation:*** We concur with the recommendation of the PASTG to include all RU secretaries on a separate mailing list at the Area level to keep them informed of pertinent issues related to their job.

## **TRAINING**

**USDA Graduate School, Midwest Training Center Questions: (312) 353- 2919 Fax training forms to: (312) 353- 3297 Mail training forms to: Chicago Midwest Training Center 230 S. Dearborn Street, DPN 30-4 Chicago, IL 61604-1687**

### **Kansas City, MO:**

**July 9-10, 1996 Effective Listening and Memory Development**

**July 10-12, 1996 Management Skills for Secretaries**

**July 17-19, 1996 Writing Effective Letters**

**July 24, 1996 Telephone Service Skills**

**July 24-25, 1996 Effective Communicating With Customers**  
**August 6-8, 1996 Essentials of English**  
**August 15-16, 1996 Managing Effective Meetings and Conferences**  
**September 10-11, 1996 Assertiveness Skills**  
**September 18-20, 1996 Office Management**

**Chicago, IL:**

**July 10-12, 1996 Technical Writing**  
**July 24-26, 1996 Office Management**  
**July 24-26, 1996 Report Writing**  
**August 7-9, 1996 Basic Writing**  
**August 13-14, 1996 Stress Management for Support Staff**  
**August 13-16, 1996 Effective Briefing Techniques**  
**September 5-6, 1996 Managing Effective Meetings and Conferences**  
**September 11-12, 1996 Effective Communication with Customers**  
**September 17-18, 1996 Effective Listening and Memory Development**  
**September 23-25, 1996 Secretarial Techniques**

**St. Louis, MO:**

**July 8-10, 1996 Secretarial Techniques**  
**July 25-26, 1996 Decision-Making and Problem Solving for Support Staff**  
**August 7-8, 1996 Proofreading**  
**August 16-17, 1996 Stress Management for Secretaries**  
**August 20-21, 1996 Effective Listening and Memory Development**  
**August 20-22, 1996 Better Office Skills and Services**  
**September 17, 1996 Strategies to Cope with Burnout**  
**September 17-18, 1996 Advanced Proofreading**  
**September 25-27, 1996 Basic Writing**

**Atlanta, GA:**

**October 27-30, 1996 AMA's Conference for Executive Secretaries and Administrative Assistants "Striving to win in the Changing Workplace"**

**CONGRATULATIONS**

**Debbie Bitner, Secretary for Biopolymer Research Unit at NCAUR received the Center's Support Person of the Year Award. Congratulations, Debbie! Jean**

**Sparks, Secretary for Cropping Systems and Water Quality Research at Columbia, MO received the Central Missouri Federal Woman of the Year. Congratulations, Jean !**

Happy Holidays!



## PASTG NEWSLETTER

### Volume 2, Issue 2

Recent PASTG Meeting The Program Administrative Support Task Group met in Peoria, November 5-7, to begin work on a Standard Operating Procedures manual, which we hope to make available to secretaries in the Midwest Area in 1997. The Group realizes that not all tasks will be done at every location, and some procedures may not apply to units located within centers. However, we also recognize a need for basic information that can be used by many locations with minor modifications to meet their specific needs. Our group is excited to think we will soon have one manual that will include most tasks we encounter, as well as provide a list of additional references for each topic. The manual should be a great resource for secretaries. Watch for it in 1997!

### **Marcia Jenkins Represents the National Secretarial Advisory Council at the Administrator's Council**

An annual report was presented September 11, 1996, at the Administrator's Council Meeting, Beltsville, Maryland. In attendance at the AC meeting were all area directors, all area administrative officers, members of Human Resource Division, and staff of the Administrator's Office. Marcia Jenkins gave the talk assisted by Angie Marchetti (AFM, Greenbelt, MD), displaying overheads. The purpose of the talk was to provide an overview of the National Secretarial Council's activities, accomplishments, and future goals.

Also, this fall, the National Council held two teleconference calls to address issues such as a Council Home Page, future planning for next year and follow-up on goals for FY97. Those goals include the home page, a council newsletter, a handbook for ARS secretarial and clerical personnel, and RL/National Meeting assistance.

Please call Marcia at any time if you'd like more information.

### **Tidbits from Travel Training**

Travel training was held at the NCAUR lab in Peoria, October 22-24. Linda Mahoney and Al Walker of Financial Management Division instructed the class.

One item to remember when doing travel authorizations (AD-202s) for training is that the purpose code will be Code 3, Training Attendance, only if block 21 of the training form (SF-182) obligates funds. If the training form is not obligating funds to a vendor, then purpose code 2, Information Meeting, should be used, and the training document number should not be shown on the AD-202. The reason behind this is that when Purpose Code 3 is used and a Training Document number listed on the AD-202, NFC computers attempt to tie the AD-202 together with the training form, which is impossible if the training document is not obligating funds and never goes to NFC.

Approved Accommodations: Remember to be making hotel reservations in establishments that meet the requirements of the Hotel and Motel Fire Safety Act (The requirements include installation of hard-wired, single station smoke detectors in each guest room of each place of public accommodation, and an automatic sprinkler system in each place of public accommodation that is more than three stories.) The Agency is supposed to have 90 percent compliance by FY-97, and we may soon need to report our level of compliance. It would be good to get in the habit now of trying to make reservations in hotels that comply with this law. Your Travel Management Center (i.e., Travel and Transport) should be able to confirm compliance if they make the reservation for you. The Federal Register also will maintain a list of hotels/motels in compliance.

## **Smart Center**

By early December, all locations should receive a catalog of resources available from the "Smart Center." These resources are a good option when training dollars are limited. Employees progress at their own pace and a variety of self-development learning materials are available to meet specific needs. Topics that may be of interest include: communications skills, management and organizational skills, team building, time management ... and more! The phone number of the Smart Center is 301-344-8450 or FAX: 301-344-8445.

## **Graduate School, USDA Training Sessions**

If you wish to receive further information on the USDA Graduate School courses, write to: USDA Graduate School, Midwest Training Center, 230 S. Dearborn Street, 30th Floor, Chicago, IL 60604- 1687. Phone (312) 353-2919, Monday-Friday 8:30 a.m. - 5:00 p.m. FAX: (312) 353-3297. Following is a list of classes offered in the Midwest through March, 1997:

Chicago, IL:

- Jan 8-9 -Communicating for Results
- Jan 22-23 -Proofreading
- Feb 4-7 -Critical Thinking: A Writing Skills Workshop
- Feb 19-20 -Listening and Memory Development
- Feb 25-27 -Briefing Techniques

Kansas City, MO:

- Jan 8-10 -Effective English Workshop
- Feb 5-6 -Assertiveness Skills
- Feb 12-13 -Communicating for Results

St. Louis, MO:

- Feb 11-12 -Editing for Impact
- Feb. 25-26 -Positive Approaches to Difficult People

- March 5-7 -Effective English Workshop
- March 11-13 -Writing Effective Letters
- March 19-20 -Communicating for Results

## **Issues Papers**

Remember to make use of the Issues Papers to convey concerns to the Area. Issues may be sent to any of the members of the Task Group. Task group members are also willing to help in any way they can, by answering a question or providing a shoulder to cry on, if that is what is needed! Your Task Group members are:

Sherri Klokkenga, 309-681-6602;

Lori Wilson-Voss, 515-294-3255;

Shirley Runge, 309-681-6595;

Karen Sussman, 517-355-7456;

Sue Ohlendorf, 515-239-8254;

Jean Sparks, 314-882-1114;

Sandy Groneberg, 320-589-3411;

Alice McCain, 217-333-1308; and

Marcia Jenkins, 309-681-6601.

## **Paper Pileup Problems?**

If you are like most of us, the paper tends to pile up on your desk faster than you can wave the magic wand to make it disappear. Statistics tell us that much of the paper that finds a final resting place on our desks can actually be thrown away! Here are a few tips that may help: Resist the temptation to skim a piece of paper and set it aside until later. It is best to do one of three things whenever you pick up a piece of paper: throw it away, file it, or act on it.

If you find something that you want to read, but you don't have time right now, place it in a "reading file" that you carry with you. You can read these items while you wait for family members, appointments, etc.

Think about the use of each piece of paper. If it is a duplicate of something kept in a master file within the office, it may not matter if you have a copy and you can throw your copy. If it is something you refer to often, you may want to file it on or near your desk. If it is something you refer to only occasionally, you may wish to file it in a cabinet further away from your desk. If you can't figure out how you will use this piece of paper now, perhaps it should be thrown away. Most importantly, make your file system work for you, rather than you working for your file system! Many times we think we need elaborate color-coded systems, when "Simple is best." (Excuse me, while I try to take my own advice and clear the mounds from my desk!)

**Congratulations, Karen!**

Congratulations to Karen Sussman on the birth of her son, Neven! Neven was born on October 9, 1996. He weighed 7 lbs. 12 oz, and was 22 1/4" long. Karen is the Editor of the PASTG News Notes, and I am only filling in during her absence. If you have items that you wish to see included in the PASTG News Notes, you may contact Karen Sussman in East Lansing, MI by : FAX: (517)337-3782; Email: ksussman@pilot.msu.edu or FTS Mail: !A03RLSBCR.

Substituting for Karen: Sandy Groneberg, Morris, MN  
(320) 589-3411; Email: sgroneberg@mail.mrsars.usda.gov