



**Report for the U.S. Department of Agriculture
Agricultural Research Service**

**Climate Assessment of the Subtropical
Horticultural Research Station**

Prepared by ADR Vantage, Inc.

February 2017

ADR VANTAGE, INC. 1660 L STREET NW, SUITE 302, WASHINGTON, DC 20036

PHONE: 202-296-2328 FAX: 202-355-6689

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REPORT FOR USDA AGRICULTURAL RESEARCH SERVICE

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I. Introduction

The Subtropical Horticultural Research Station (SHRS) in Miami, Florida, a unit of the USDA's Agricultural Research Service (ARS) conducts research to develop and transfer solutions to agricultural problems of high national priority relating to food and nutrition, agricultural economy, and natural resources and the environment. ADR Vantage was engaged by ARS to perform an employee climate assessment of the SHRS. The primary purpose of the assessment was to identify factors that contribute to employee complaints of harassment and a hostile work environment, to help the ARS leadership understand the state of concerns within the SHRS and to provide recommendations to address them.

Dianne Lipsey and Rick Buccheri from ADR Vantage spent three days on site at SHRS in mid-December, 2016. We interviewed the current temporary Research Leader (RL), Dr. Hamed Abbas and 26 other staff from all levels of the organization. We had subsequent conversations with Area Director, Dr. Deborah Brennan; Associate Area Director, Archie Tucker; and others with firsthand knowledge of the recent developments at SHRS including former temporary RL for SHRS, Dr. Ricardo Goenaga; former Research Scientist, Dr. Ray Schnell; and USDA Human Resources Specialist Supervisor for Labor Relations, Kathleen Hall. Most everyone we spoke with was very forthcoming. Their perspective varied but there was strong consensus about the overall themes.

This report provides an analysis of the resulting themes from the interviews and our findings and recommendations. Our recommendations reflect our understanding of ARS's actions that are already in progress to address the issues concerning the operations and staff morale.

II. Methodology

ADR Vantage began the climate assessment with preliminary conversations with ARS Associate Area Director, Archie Tucker and USDA Senior Counsel, Stephanie Masker. From those meetings, we learned that there have been an abundance of grievances and formal complaints originating from the SHRS, and that there were specific challenges between management and the employee union, the National Federation of Federal Employees (NFFE).

Process. Based on our understanding of ARS's objectives for the climate assessment, we determined data collection would need to be through one-on-one, in-person interviews. To encourage participation, their involvement needed to be voluntary, questions needed to be constructed to allow unforced, genuine concerns to arise unprompted and we needed to assure participants anonymity in their responses.

Once dates for the visit to SHRS could be confirmed, the Area Director, Dr. Brennan, announced the climate assessment to the SHRS employees, introduced the ADR Vantage team and encouraged voluntary participation. She also reminded Bargaining Unit Employees (BUE) they are entitled to have their union representative present for interviews if they so choose. ADR Vantage reached out to establish contact with Dr. Hamed Abbas, the temporary Research Leader, and employees at the site and to schedule interviews. In our communication with staff, we emphasized that participation was voluntary and we explained how their contributions would be used to identify patterns and trends that could be shared with ARS without exposing individuals. We had a short turnaround for the visits because of the upcoming holiday season and so, to ensure as much participation as possible, we made multiple invitations to employees and offered to schedule interviews by telephone and at times convenient to employees. We also continued to schedule appointments throughout our visit. We were able to speak with 26 of the roughly 32 employees at SHRS and the temporary RL.

Questionnaire Design. The interview data collection tool was a thirty-three question interview, composed of open-ended questions and rating scales. The open-ended questions were meant to elicit broad perspectives from employees to allow for their open and honest sharing of their true work experiences, without directing or limiting the nature of their responses. Likert rating scales and Yes/No questions supplemented the open-ended questions to provide measurable scores for specific questions regarding experiences. Overall, the questions focused on the following themes:

- **Employee Engagement:** How well employees understood their role in relation to the overall work and mission of the SHRS and their satisfaction levels.
- **Communication & Relationships:** How employees get and share information, the degree and effectiveness of collaboration and coordination among work groups and which relationships are most supportive or challenging.
- **Respect and Fair Treatment:** These questions address the core questions for the assessment – the existence, prevalence and impact of treatment that could be considered harassment, hostile or otherwise discriminatory.
- **Leadership & Support:** How individual managers and the management structure within SHRS, ARS and USDA support employees and their work and what leadership factors most impact the effectiveness of the SHRS.

Interviews. ADR Vantage representatives Dianne Lipsey and Rick Buccheri were onsite at the SHRS in Miami, FL between Tuesday, December 13 and Thursday, December 15, 2016. During that time, we met Dr. Hamed Abbas and 26 of roughly 32 employees. This represented approximately 81% of the staff positions as designated on the Organizational Chart. The level of participation also provided a cross section of perspectives from every employment category and research area. Phone interviews were also offered to employees who were not able to meet for an in-person interview. One employee made use of this option. All employees interviewed were aware of at least some of the issues impacting the atmosphere and work at SHRS. For the most part they were careful to comment within the confines of their own experiences or observations and expressed hope that their contributions will result in improvements at the site.

Through the interviews, four additional people were identified who could offer unique perspectives on the atmosphere and onsite experience at SHRS. They each accepted the invitation to speak with us and provided valuable perspective and historical context relating to the issues facing the SHRS. Those individuals included:

- ARS Area Director, Deborah Brennan, PhD
- Former Temporary Research Leader, Ricardo Goenaga, PhD
- USDA Labor Relations Officer, Kathleen Hall
- Former Research Geneticist, SHRS, Ray Schnell, PhD¹

Questions for the supplemental interviews were tailored to help us understand a broader context such as: key turning points and the events that preceded them; the roles and relationships between SHRS, ARS, PALS, and the Union; and previous efforts to address personnel and organizational issues that are still impacting SHRS and its employees.

Report Findings. As this is a climate assessment, we collected and are reporting experiences and points of view from employees, management, ARS Area Office officials and others as listed above. The report reflects the dominant themes and critically important observations from those subjects that are affecting the employees' workplace experiences. At times, we specify a subgroup of employees such as Scientists, Technicians, Administrative staff, laborers or maintenance employees. At times, we refer to the "Researchers" to cover the Scientists and Technicians. Researchers are the majority of employees and those most directly affected by many of the issues identified in this report.

III. Data Analysis

The Subtropical Horticultural Research Station is located in Miami, Florida and conducts research under the auspices of the USDA ARS Southeast Area Office in Stoneville, Mississippi. Its top leadership on site is a Research Leader (RL), who in addition to his own research projects is

¹ Dr. Schnell continues to work onsite for an aligned organization. He made clear his comments were based on his experience with SHRS rather than representing the opinions or experiences of his current employer.

responsible for the overall executive leadership at the Station. The SHRS Organizational Chart shows a full-time staff compliment of 40 employees². There are seven Scientists (with one vacancy) each with his or her own team, and an Administrative Officer (AO) with a four-person administrative team. Most of the maintenance support for the site including custodial workers and tractor operators work under the supervision of the Horticulturalist.

At the time of the climate assessment, SHRS had a temporary Research Leader, and there were 11 vacancies³, including the permanent Research Leader, the Horticulturalist, both custodial workers and two of the three tractor operators. Of the remaining five vacancies, three were from a single six-person team supporting the Plant Geneticist. (b)(6)

Employees at all levels of the SHRS eagerly participated in the interviews. Twenty-six (26) of the approximately 32 SHRS employees on staff at the time, and the temporary Research Leader met with ADR Vantage. Most were very forthcoming and hopeful the climate assessment would yield improvements in long-standing issues and frustrations. Almost all observations, ratings and responses to open-ended questions can be captured in one of the following themes.

- Employee engagement
- Permanent Research Leader
- (b)(6)
- (b)(6)
- Communication factors and collaboration
- Employee perceptions of hostility, harassment, or unfair treatment

1. **Employee Engagement.** Most research employees interviewed spoke positively, and even passionately, about their work and its contribution. They willingly described their work and how it relates to SHRS's mission. Many of those working in maintenance and administrative roles could also describe how their work contributed to SHRS. Employee satisfaction and description of the overall atmosphere is reflected in some of the representative quotes below.

- Overall satisfaction level for employees was a 6.29 out of a possible 10.
- Employees rated the overall atmosphere of the SHRS workplace at a 5.29 out of 10.

² There are 40 permanent positions shown on the SHRS Organizational Chart with 11 vacancies. There are also at least 2 temporary employees and the ARS employee temporarily assigned to SHRS as the RL.

³ According to the Organizational Chart.

- Enthusiasm for their work was affected by feelings of losses from earlier years – of staff, resources, focus and collegiality and a feeling that others outside of SHRS may not care about their work.
 - *“I love my job and I feel like I really make a difference.” ~ “I consider my work very important. The industry relies on what I do.” ~ “My job is to make it possible for them [the Scientists] to do the work they do.” ~ “This is my dream job.”*
 - *“The atmosphere before was that we were all willing to help each other. Now we are trying to stay away.” ~ “We feel like we get the short end of the stick. Everyone is overworked and understaffed.” ~ “Not getting a [permanent] RL makes people who feel unappreciated.”*
 - Within the research units, most employees appreciate the relationships. Most of the Technicians enjoy trusted and even collegial relationships with their Scientists and the Scientists appreciate and in some cases, entrust their Technicians with greater responsibilities than Technicians might usually expect.
2. **Permanent Research Leader.** *“We need steady and good leadership.”* The prevailing view is that issues that are most impacting the site are a result of not being able to secure skilled and committed leadership. The following are composite viewpoints from employee responses to questions about satisfaction on the job, overall atmosphere, and specific questions about management.

- **Collaboration, Collegiality, and Cooperation.** Most of the Scientists indicated a degree of in-fighting and competition among their colleagues. Technicians seemed less affected, but aware of tensions and its effect on their relationships with other Technicians. The following was shared with ADR Vantage as an example of the kind of impact an RL would have on relationships among the Researchers.

There was disagreement among the Scientists about the use and maintenance of a piece of equipment. The manufacturer recommended use of a chemical solution claiming that it is better for the equipment but historically SHRS had used a water solution, believing it to be safer and able to produce comparable results. When this disagreement arose and a choice was made to follow the manufacturer’s recommendation the decision produced resentment among those who disagreed.

- (b)(6) . The most cited complaint among employees interviewed

(b)(6) (b)(6)

(b)(6)

(b)(6)

Most believe these problems can be addressed but requires vigilance and persistence that is only likely to come from a strong, committed and permanent RL.

- **Employee Morale.** Scientists do not feel there is sustained interest in their work. Others see ongoing unresolved issues, a lack of a sense of unity, shared purpose and that someone is advocating for them. *“After a while, you stop caring.”*

Many employees appreciate the efforts of the current temporary RL, Dr. Hamed Abbas, but recognize that his attention is consumed by the unresolved personnel issues and that he will ultimately get frustrated and leave. Even if he can make some of the needed changes, they believe he will not stay long enough to resolve long-standing issues and restore the cohesive and coordinated research environment.

“The leadership void is the big thing. If someone could fix this void to a full-time permanent, respected, well-qualified candidate for research leader, the apparent problems would go away.”

3.

(b)(6)

(b)(6)

(b)(6)

(b)(6)

[Redacted]

- (b)(6) (b)(6)
[Redacted]

- (b)(6) (b)(6)
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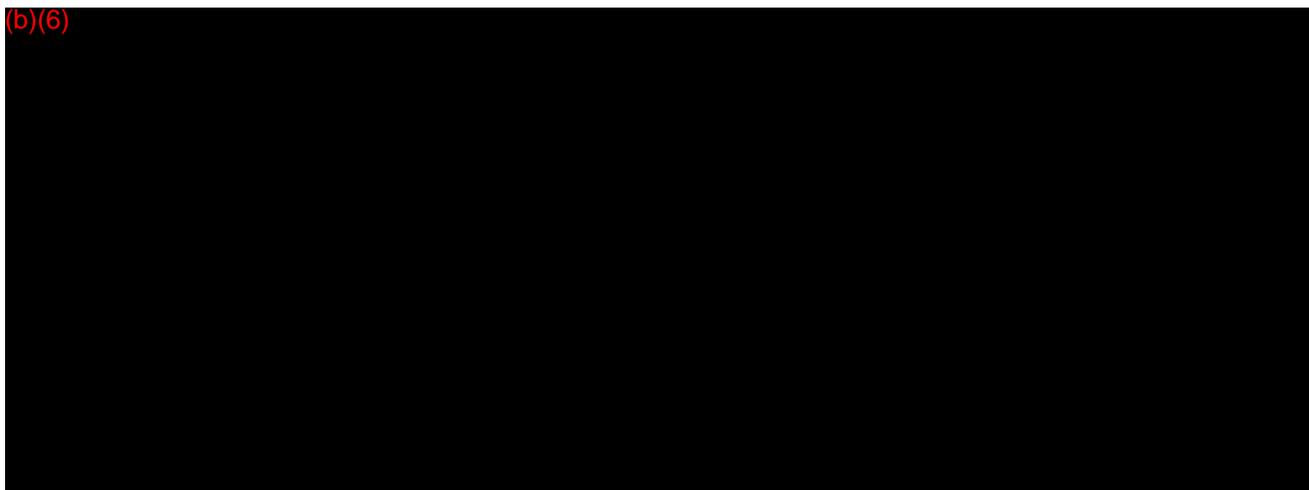
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5. **Communication Factors and Collaboration.** We were interested to know about how information is shared at SHRS and how effectively it is communicated in order to identify communication factors that might be affecting the work and morale. Such factors might include the routine exchange of information about SHRS business, research priorities, the search for a permanent Research Leader, and responses to issues employees may have raised such as with (b)(6).

Scientists were the most informed about SHRS developments but also ranged in their responses regarding what they know, how they hear information and how often they attend management meetings. Technicians learned about SHRS developments sometimes officially through emails, more often through their Scientists but also unofficially and informally from other employees. Maintenance employees primarily relied on informal communication. Informal communication was described as information passed from employee to employee, like rumors. The temporary RL has tried to reinstitute regular meetings but we were unable to determine if they are happening regularly or effectively and how much support he gets from Scientists in that effort.

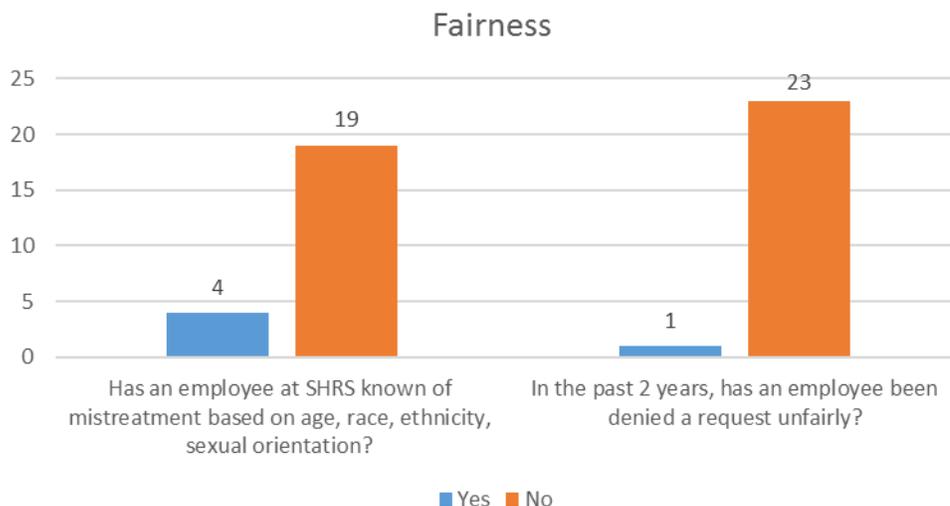
Researchers do not seem to value the exchange of information as they may have in the past. They express that they must be more self-sufficient and at times more self-interested than in past years due to reduced staff, inability to get sufficient (b)(6) and not having a permanent Research Leader. They recognize that this development has led to reduced coordination and collegial exchange and increased tensions among some Scientists. With the resources and support provided by MARS, some feel that the cacao research receives a disproportionate amount of attention and resources. Scientists also recognize that a strong, engaged and permanent RL can help balance the research priorities and support a more unified and balanced focus for the work of the SHRS as a whole.

“We have minimum collaboration and conversations among colleagues. I tried to not rock the boat for the first few years, but now I'm getting tired.”

6. **Employee Perception of Hostility, Harassment, or Unfair Treatment.** Over recent years there have been (b)(6) from SHRS. For the climate assessment, ADR Vantage was interested to learn whether and how widely employees share the kind of real or perceived experiences (b)(6). We asked questions about fairness and equality of treatment to help understand (b)(6). We also asked open-ended questions about the atmosphere and satisfaction to shed light on the more generalized concerns about hostility and harassment in the work place.

• **Fair Treatment.**

- When asked, “How fairly do you think you are treated by your manager?”, employees responded with an average rating of 8.10 out of a possible high score of 10.
- 23 of 24 of those responding answered, “No” to the question: “In the past 2 years, have you personally been denied requests, where you believe the denial was unfair?”
- When asked, “Have you or do you know of someone at SHRS who has been treated unfairly based on age, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation etc.?” 19 of 23 responded, “No.”
- A large majority of employees interviewed speak positively about their own managers⁴.
 - 92% said they were likely or very likely (were comfortable) to raise a concern with their manager.
 - 75% were judged to offer a positive response to the question, “If you had one word to describe what you value most in your manager, what would it be?” The following are representative examples of the words. “Integrity, Sincerity, Lenient, Not Micromanaging, Respect, Honesty, Fair, Patient.



⁴ The term “manager” refers to the immediate supervisor of employees being interviewed, whether Scientist, AO, or RL.

- **Use the term “Hostile” or “Harassment”.**
 - When asked to identify their most challenging relationships, 9 employees specifically identified (b)(6) 11 specifically identified (b)(6) Four other individuals were identified but none received more than 1 designation.
 - To open-ended questions about satisfaction level, overall atmosphere, and what impacts performance, the lack of (b)(6), lack of (b)(6), and difficulties with (b)(6) by far exceeded any other negative comment.
- **Gender, Ethnicity and Racial concerns.**
 - Approximately 25% of those interviewed described situations that made them uncomfortable relating to gender, ethnicity, and race.
 - This report has already (b)(6)
- **Factors Contributing Negatively to the Work Environment.** The following factors frequently appeared in statements from employees.
 - Interpersonal conflict among some of the Scientists,
 - Interpersonal conflict between the Scientists and the administrative staff, and
 - Lack of sufficient staffing, sufficient (b)(6) communication, and a permanent Research Leader to provide focus and oversight on these matters.

IV. Summary of Findings

The factors most affecting the working environment at SHRS are the long delay in hiring a strong and permanent Research Leader, a host of issues attributable to the performance and conduct of (b)(6), and a disheartened and disjointed Research team. The three are interrelated and together consume large amounts of time, resources, and overall sense of well-being at SHRS. To address these issues will require continued vigilance and determination to continue to work toward ensuring performance and conduct issues are being consistently addressed, especially while transitioning to a new RL.

1. **Employee Engagement.** Most Scientists and Technicians like their work and have high regard for and like their research teams, but have little knowledge about what else is happening at SHRS or ARS plans for the site. Even so, they view the work environment as very negative largely because of lack of (b)(6) and the hostility or operational harassment they experienced from (b)(6). The fear of getting dragged into to problems (b)(6) and frustration of not being able to get things taken care of is contributing to erosion of goodwill, sense of well-being, and

overall morale. Many employees are further discouraged that ARS will not address the issues anytime soon.

2. **Research Leaders and ARS Support.** Multiple changes in the RL position over the past six years, even with the considerable time and energy devoted to SHRS by ARS Area Office and USDA, has contributed to many of the issues identified by the employees in the climate assessment. It is common that such a situation, especially coupled with the deficiencies in the (b)(6) will erode the cohesion in an organization and employee morale as it has at SHRS.

Some Scientists are frustrated and even feel bitterness about the amount of time it has taken for ARS to hire a permanent RL who is skilled and committed to their research and administrative needs. They appear uncertain and possibly uninterested in working with a temporary RL to address long-standing issues because he is temporary. From their past experiences, they expect he will soon leave and they are not convinced they should invest energy until there is a permanent RL.

3. **The Role of the Scientists.** The Scientists are key players in the success of strategies going forward. They are highly regarded by their teams and are committed to the research, which is the reason for SHRS to exist. They recognize that some of them have become increasingly self-interested as they have struggled with resource limitations, staffing and (b)(6) and lack of clarity and constancy in leadership. These factors have contributed to the increase in tensions among them. Strategies that demonstrate an appreciation of their contributions and a clear commitment to their issues can have an important impact on the entire staff. They also recognize how important the RL is for them; that they need for someone to define a vision for the future, to help set priorities, advocate for their needs and to draw the SHRS research community together.

4. (b)(6) **Personnel Issues.** The temporary RL has been confronting the very difficult personnel issues identified in this report, (b)(6). He has also been implementing policies to require accountability administratively and among researchers, and is attempting to address the personnel issues to restore the resourceful and collegial climate that existed in the past. The following summarize the most impacting of these issues.

- (b)(6) Researchers need clarity from the (b)(6)

- (b)(6) (b)(6)

- (b)(6) (b)(6)

- (b)(6)

- (b)(6) (b)(6)

5. (b)(6) (b)(6)

(b)(6)

6. Perceptions of Hostile, Harassment, and Unfair Treatment. The source of what employees describe as harassment and hostility stems (b)(6)

(b)(6)

(b)(5)

(b)(6) some employees have or are experiencing uncomfortable comments, jokes and suggestions based on their gender, ethnicity, or race. No one described these experiences as harassment but their experiences suggest insensitivity or a lack of recognition that these actions or statements are not appropriate could reflect deeper attitudes.

7. (b)(5) (b)(5)

(b)(5) (b)(6)

⁵ (b)(6)

V. Recommendations

1. **Hire and onboard permanent Research Leader as soon as possible.** For this hire, it will be particularly important that the person selected is fully apprised of the challenges. The interview panel should be convinced that he or she will be skilled and committed to helping address immediate issues and rebuilding cohesion among the research teams. The following are recommendations to support the new RL and the transition.
 - 1.1. For the new RL to be successful it will be especially important that he or she:
 - Quickly establishes credibility with the Scientists and demonstrates an interest in their work;
 - Demonstrates skill and confidence as a manager with energy to address tough challenges; and
 - Can gain consensus on a plan-of-action to restore employee morale and team coordination and collaboration.
 - 1.2. In final interviews, share findings from the climate assessment and ask questions about his or her approach to addressing issues.
 - 1.3. Be prepared to offer the incoming RL resources to engage a neutral facilitator to help build Scientists' support and address team building, conflict management and process improvements issues.
 - 1.4. Brief the incoming RL on the steps taken by Dr. Abbas for continuity and as a framework to build upon.
2. **Address internal issues while preparing for the new Research Leader.** It will be important to sustain and build on the progress Dr. Abbas has been able to make in resolving the administrative and personnel issues, instituting new procedures, and working with Scientists and staff. The following efforts will reinforce support for Dr. Abbas or another temporary RL and the Scientists while onboarding a new RL.
 - 2.1 If possible, retain Dr. Abbas for the transition period. If not possible, confirm with him how long he will be able to continue and instruct him to communicate this to the SHRS staff.
 - 2.2 Whether or not Dr. Abbas is able to remain as temporary RL through the transition, actively coordinate with him on the resolution of the ongoing personnel issues to prevent backtracking and better ensure a smooth transition to the new RL.
 - 2.3 If possible, (b)(6)

2.4 Provide the temporary RL with resources during the transition that will allow him to engage:

- A neutral conflict coach or other process consultant to support his handling of ongoing and very difficult internal conflicts, (b)(6), and
- A neutral facilitator to help improve communication and dialogue with Scientists during the transition.

2.5 Commit to regular communication with staff including regularly scheduled staff meetings and supplemented meetings with email updates from the temporary RL to keep employees apprised of SHRS, ARS and USDA developments. This will be especially important for reassuring staff during this time of SHRS transitions and the introduction of a new USDA administration.

3. Communicate the outcomes of the climate assessment. It is always important to employees who participate in an assessment to learn what will result from their involvement. It is especially true when employees feel vulnerable or discouraged. Communicating as much as legally possible about the results and proposed actions builds confidence and trust that SHRS employees will need to continue to support their managers and leaders as they work to address their issues. This communication could be done in an all-hands meeting or in a meeting limited to the managers but with the expectation that the managers brief their teams. Ideally, Dr. Brennan and/or Mr. Tucker would meet with staff, share as much as possible from the findings and actions the Area Office proposes, without betraying the confidentiality of participants, and encourage dialogue with the staff. It may be useful for the ARS office to engage a neutral facilitator to help encourage a productive dialogue and capture and help process points of view from the staff.

4. Address morale issues among Scientists. Acting quickly on issues raised by the Scientists will communicate that their concerns have been heard and validated and will give them confidence and build goodwill toward their new leadership. (b)(6) we recommend these actions be conducted under the authority of the temporary RL or Area Office.

4.1. (b)(6).

- Designate someone from the Area Office or Headquarters (b)(6)
- (b)(6)

- 4.2. Engage a neutral facilitator to work with the temporary RL and Scientists to define and gain consensus on priority administrative issues, create a framework for coordination during the transition, and begin restoring collegiality.
- 4.3. Provide regular updates to the Scientists and the Administrative staff on the hiring progress for the RL. We would recommend that these communications come directly from Area Office Director, Dr. Brennan in coordination with the temporary RL.
5. Govern actions of the (b)(6). (b)(6)
(b)(5), (b)(6)
6. Offer EEO and Implicit Bias training. Within the coming 6-12 months, conduct training for the SHRS that includes both basics of a manager's EEO responsibility and a section on implicit bias, to address the issues raised in the climate assessment about statements, jokes and uncomfortable situations based on gender or ethnicity.
7. Create a plan-of-action to incorporate recommendations and other actions adopted resulting from the climate assessment. The incoming RL will want his or her own action plan or at least to review, revise and adopt an interim one. Acknowledging that hiring and onboarding could take months, we strongly recommend that the temporary RL be empowered to create an interim action plan. This is needed to assure a systematic response to immediate and critical issues and to reinforce the Area Office's message that ARS takes employee concerns seriously.
 - 7.1. Create a plan that:
 - Systematically incorporates, prioritizes and implements ARS priorities for addressing concerns raised in this assessment; and
 - Includes benchmarks and methods for collecting periodic feedback from the RL, researchers and others on progress.
 - 7.2. Build in employee support. Ideally there would be some level of employee involvement in developing the plan, at least keeping them apprised about the planning process, creating ways for them to provide suggestions, and encouraging their help in implementation.
8. Conduct a follow-up climate assessment in 12-months to gauge progress and refocus recommendations as needed. Follow-up assessments are not always needed or possible, given funding realities. When possible however, a follow-up assessment will support ARS objectives of improving SHRS and communicate to the SHRS employees ARS's intentions and commitment.