

U.S. Office of Personnel Management
Office of Merit Systems Oversight and Effectiveness
Classification Appeal and FLSA Programs

Chicago Oversight Division
230 South Dearborn, Room 3060
Chicago, IL 60604

Classification Appeal Decision
Under section 5112 of title 5, United States Code

Appellant: [appellant]

Agency classification: Industrial Engineer
GS-896-14

Organization: [Research Station]
U.S. Forest Service
U. S. Department of Agriculture
[city and state]

OPM decision: Industrial Engineer
GS-896-14

OPM decision number: C-0896-14-01

/s/

Ricardo Sims
Operations Supervisor

October 28, 2002

Date

As provided in section 511.612 of title 5, Code of Federal Regulations, this decision constitutes a certificate that is mandatory and binding on all administrative, certifying, payroll, disbursing, and accounting officials of the government. The agency is responsible for reviewing its classification decisions for identical, similar, or related positions to ensure consistency with this decision. There is no right of further appeal. This decision is subject to discretionary review only under conditions and time limits specified in the *Introduction to the Position Classification Standards*, appendix 4, section G (address provided in appendix 4, section H).

Decision sent to:

[appellant]
[address]
[city and state]

Director
[location] Human Resources Management
Service Center
U.S. Forest Service
U.S. Department of Agriculture
[address]
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Mr. Joseph V. Colantuoni, Acting Director
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Introduction

On January 15, 2002, the Chicago Oversight Division of the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM) accepted a classification appeal from [appellant]. The Division received the agency's administrative report concerning the appeal on March 26, 2002.

The appellant works in the [location] Research Station [abbreviation], U.S. Forest Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), [city and state]. In the last five years, his position has been evaluated by two different National Research Panels (July 25, 2000, and March 23, 1998). In each case, his position was evaluated at the GS-14 level. The appellant's position is currently classified as Research Industrial Engineer, GS-896-14, but he believes it should be graded at the GS-15 level. Specifically, he disagrees with the scoring for Factor IV of the Research Grade Evaluation Guide (RGEG). We have accepted and decided this appeal under section 5112 of title 5, United States Code.

This decision is based on a thorough review of all information provided by the appellant and his agency. In addition, separate telephone interviews were conducted with the appellant and his supervisor, the [Research Station] Assistant Director for Research. Both the appellant and his supervisor have certified to the accuracy of the appellant's official Position Description (PD), number [number].

Position information

The official position description reflects that the appellant uses systems analysis to evaluate alternative harvesting strategies for all forested geographic regions in [a specific portion of the country]. He is the Project Leader of the multifunctional forest harvesting work unit entitled "Systems Analysis to Evaluate Alternative Harvesting Strategies." Two specific problem areas are under study: (1) inadequate management planning models for forest operations and forest product transportation and (2) lack of complete synthesis on all aspects of the forest operations process, multiproduct harvesting, and loss caused by log damage and other procedures. The purpose of the appellant's work is to develop explanations and theories to help others understand physical phenomena and processes.

The results of our interviews, the appellant's PD, and other material of record furnish more information about his duties and responsibilities and how they are performed.

Series, title, and guide determination

The appellant conducts research on alternative harvesting strategies, concentrating on management planning models and the synthesis of all forest operations. The primary responsibility of his unit is to serve as a research arm to Regions 8 and 9 of the National Forest Systems and to provide scientific expertise and support in helping solve on-the-ground problems. Aspects of his research have direct application on 170 million acres of forest land spread over 26 states in the eastern half of the country.

Industry experts agree that further research is especially important in the area of managing and protecting non-timber resources and also in determining the best mix of logging equipment, silvicultural treatments, and utilization levels for sustainable management of specific stands, which will impact wildlife populations for many years into the future. Research is also needed on the development of forest management planning tools for steep terrain that are consistent with an ecosystem management approach; identification of efficient product separation and sorting methods; and the integration of harvesting systems analysis, timber stand attributes, and primary product markets into a comprehensive economic analysis.

The appellant's research has generated stump-to-mill cost-estimating methods that can be used under a wide range of conditions; these methods have been applied on the West Coast as well as the East Coast. Much of his work has been directed toward integration across disciplines (e.g., biology, engineering, economics) in the management of hardwood forests. He has also developed expert systems designed to predict production rates and costs for cable thinnings, partial harvests, shelterwood cuts, and group-selection harvests.

The agency has assigned the appellant's position to the Industrial Engineering Series, GS-896, and he does not disagree. We concur with the agency's series determination. Similar to the appellant's position, and as stated in the GS-896 standard, that series includes positions whose primary duties are to plan, design, analyze, and improve integrated systems of employees, materials, and equipment to produce a product or render a service. The established title for positions in the GS-896 Series is *Industrial Engineer*.

Because the appellant spends all of his time conducting research, the position was evaluated by application of the Research Grade-Evaluation Guide which is used across series lines to determine the grade levels of research positions. Part I of the RGEG is used to evaluate positions at GS-11 through GS-15 that are engaged in basic or applied research in the sciences, when the functions involve the personal performance, as the highest-level function and for a substantial portion of the time, of professionally responsible research.

Grade determination

Part I of the RGEG includes four factors that are considered and rated separately, with the total point value then being converted to a grade level by use of the grade determination chart provided in the RGEG. Each factor is evaluated at one of five degree levels. Three of these levels (A, C, and E) are defined in the RGEG. Degree B or D may be assigned when a position is evaluated between levels A and C or levels C and E, respectively. A position must substantially exceed the level defined before crediting at the next higher level can be considered. An intermediate degree level can only be assigned when the defined level above it is approached, but not entirely met, and there are no limiting factors to consider.

The agency assigned Degree D (8 points) to Factor I (The research situation, or assignment), Degree E (10 points) for Factor II (Supervision received), and Degree D (8 points) for Factor III (Guidelines and originality). After careful review, we concur with the agency's evaluation of those three factors. Therefore, we have addressed only Factor IV (Qualifications and scientific contributions) in this evaluation.

Factor IV, Qualifications and scientific contributions

This factor measures the total qualifications, professional standing and recognition, and scientific contributions of the researcher, insofar as these bear on the dimensions of the current work situation and work performance. It is given twice the weight of the other factors. The RGEG instructs that although the total history of accomplishment is to be considered under this factor, recent research is essential to full credit for past accomplishments. The July 25, 2000, Forest Service peer panel assigned Degree D (16 points) to this factor. The appellant contends that his position should be rated at Degree E (20 points).

At Degree C, the researcher has demonstrated the researcher ability as a mature, competent, and productive worker and will typically have authored one or more publications of considerable interest and value to the field (as evidenced by favorable reviews, by citation in the work of others, by presentations of papers to professional societies, etc.), and/or will have contributed inventions, new designs, or techniques which are of material significance in the solution of important applied problems. Contributions at this level derive from highly productive (in terms of both quantity and quality) personal performance of research of such originality, soundness, and value as to have marked the employee as a significant contributor to his or her field. Researchers at this level are beginning to be sought out for consultation by colleagues who are professionally mature researchers. The RGEG speaks of *Emerging recognition* in the field at Degree C.

At Degree E, the researcher has demonstrated outstanding attainment in a broad, or in a narrow but intensely specialized, field of research. The researcher will typically have authored a number of important publications, of which at least some have had a major impact on advancing the field, or are accepted as definitive of important areas of it, and/or he or she will have contributed inventions, new designs, or techniques which are regarded as major advances in basic or applied research, and which have opened the way for extensive further developments, or have solved problems of great importance to the scientific field, to the agency, or to the public.

Also at Degree E, contributions are of such importance and magnitude that they serve to move the art forward to the extent that other researchers must take note of the advance in order to keep abreast of development in the field. Typical of Degree E, the researcher speaks authoritatively regarding the field in contacts within and outside the government, and the researcher is sought out as a consultant by colleagues who are, themselves, specialists in the field. At Degree E, recognition in the literature of the researcher's field through favorable reviews and numerous citations by others is considered further evidence of attainment.

The appellant has produced 106 publications in the past 19 years; 34 which likely would be considered refereed by the scientific community in the strict sense of the word (published in refereed journals, having met the criteria of a blind review conducted by an editor with the power to reject or demand revision of a submitted manuscript). This means that he has produced an average of five to six publications per year, and an average of two per year in a refereed outlet. This publication history, as evaluated by the current panel, is considered

respectable, but not exceptional. His rate of publication was relatively high in the late 1980's, but it has reflected a declining trend since the early 1990's.

In the past five years, the appellant has authored or contributed to 19 publications. Of these, 9 were proceedings (3 refereed) and 10 were journal articles (5 refereed). The RGEG instructs that, although the total history of accomplishment is to be considered under this factor, recent research is essential to full credit for past accomplishments. The appellant's publication productivity easily exceeds Degree C, but there is no evidence in his work that it has had a major impact on advancing the field or that it has been accepted as definitive of important areas of the field, as described at Degree E. Much of his work has been application of existing methods and development of original software systems for scheduling, evaluating, and costing harvesting systems. He lists no patents or other indications of outstanding engineering accomplishment.

Similar to Degree C, the appellant's accomplishments suggest that his work is recognized by managers in the regions where he was working at the time his research was conducted and that managers in other regions have occasionally noted his work. Similarly, most of his presentations are to groups whose members are mainly interested in forest engineering. The appellant has not shown that other scientists have begun to design and conduct studies based on his methodology or in response to his findings, and there is no evidence that he is being sought out by a variety of groups, which would be characteristic of Degree E.

The appellant has clearly made useful contributions, exceeding degree C, but his work does not demonstrate the impact on his field that would be characteristic of Degree E. He lists membership in two International Union of Forest Research Organizations working groups, but shows almost no evidence of participation in or service to these groups. He has organized no more than one or two local conferences.

The Web of Science citation index lists only 17 of the appellant's publications, only 3 of which have been cited by other authors. Two publications (#6 and #16) have been cited once. One publication (#3) has been cited seven times, including three citations by the appellant himself. The low level of citation indicates that his scientific contributions have not been sufficiently significant to attract the attention of many other scientists, as would be typical of Degree E.

The appellant explains that his small budget, which is beyond his control, is one reason for limited involvement with national or international groups. However, that issue cannot be factored into the present evaluation because the RGEG requires that only the incumbent's qualifications, contributions, and professional standing be considered. Moreover, many scientists operate with limited budget allocations, and they have overcome such barriers by finding creative ways to accomplish their research objectives, often by extending their capabilities through collaboration and coordination with other groups. The appellant has done some of this, particularly in regard to interactions with national forests in his assigned geographic area. However, that effort alone does not warrant assignment of the higher degree. Because Degree E is not fully met, we assign Degree D (16 points).

Summary

The total of 42 points falls within the GS-14 point range (36-42 points) on the grade-determination chart provided in the RGEG. Therefore, the appellant's position is classified at that grade level.

Decision

The appellant's position is properly classified as Industrial Engineer, GS-896-14.