

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

Dallas Oversight Division
1100 Commerce Street, Room 4C22
Dallas, TX 75242

Job Grading Appeal Decision
Under section 5346 of title 5, United States Code

Appellants: [3 appellants]

Agency classification: Water Treatment Plant Operator
WG-5409-09

Organization: Water Treatment Plant
Utilities Unit
Operations Flight
[number] Civil Engineering Squadron
[number] Support Group
[installation]
Department of the Air Force
[location]

OPM decision: Water Treatment Plant Operator
WG-5409-09

OPM decision number: C-5409-09-01

Bonnie J. Brandon
Classification Appeals Officer

December 30, 2002

Date

As provided in section S7-8 of the *Operating Manual: Federal Wage System*, this decision constitutes a certificate that is mandatory and binding on all administrative, certifying, payroll, disbursing, and accounting officials of the government. There is no right of further appeal. This decision is subject to discretionary review only under conditions and time limits specified in section 532.705(f) of title 5, Code of Federal Regulations (address provided in the *Introduction to the Position Classification Standards*, appendix 4, section H).

Decision sent to:

[appellants' names and addresses]

[name]
AFGE Local [number]
[address]

Civilian Personnel Officer
Human Resources Office
[installation address]

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Introduction

On September 4, 2002, the Dallas Oversight Division of the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM) accepted a job grading appeal from [names of 3 appellants]. We received their agency's administrative report on October 1, 2002. The appellants' positions are currently classified as Water Treatment Plant Operator, WG-5409-09. The appellants are employed in the Water Treatment Plant of the Utilities Unit, Operations Flight, [number] Civil Engineering Squadron, [number] Support Group, [installation] Department of the Air Force, [installation location].

The appellants had first filed an appeal with the Department of Defense where their jobs were found to be correctly evaluated as Water Treatment Plant Operator, WG-5409-09. The appellants disagree with that decision and believe their jobs should be evaluated as Water Treatment Plant Operator, WG-5409-10. We have accepted the appeal as timely and have processed it under section 5436 of title 5, United States Code.

To help decide this appeal, an Oversight representative held telephone conversations on November 14, 2002, with the appellants and on November 19, 2002, with the Utility Systems Repair/Operator Supervisor (the agency refers to this position organizationally as Superintendent). In reaching our decision, we have reviewed information gained from these conversations and all material of record furnished by the appellants and their agency, including the appellants' official job description (number [number]).

Job information

The appellants are currently assigned to the Water Treatment Plant located on [installation]. Their immediate supervisor is a military Technical Sergeant who assigns work to shifts and conducts the appellants' performance appraisals. The Superintendent is the second level supervisor who provides direction to the military supervisor. The appellants' duties are to operate, inspect, maintain, and troubleshoot the water plant equipment and systems for [installation]. The equipment and systems consist of a reverse osmosis unit, nine water wells, chemical feeders, hydrochlorinators, chlorinators, booster pumps, mixed media filters, pressure sand filters, overhead and ground storage tanks, chemical pumps, and swimming pools. They are also responsible for maintaining several additional remote reverse osmosis systems located throughout the base such as at the Officer's Club, Non-commissioned Officer's Club, the Base Exchange, and the child care center. The appellants assure water wells are functioning and that water tank levels are at proper levels both through visual confirmation and through a monitored computer telemetry operating system. The appellants perform routine tests of water to monitor levels of chlorine, fluoride, hardness, and turbidity.

The water treatment plant operates 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The appellants work second and third shifts and weekends and are the only State-certified Water Treatment Plant Operators at the AFB. On the second and third shifts the appellants usually work alone with military personnel to fill in. Most State and Federally required water sampling and testing is done by the Bioenvironmental Flight located on [installation]. Those results are conveyed to the appellants to determine the proper course of action based on those readings.

Occupation, title, and standard determination

The appellants' job best fits in the Water Treatment Plant Operating, 5409, occupation which covers work involved in the operation of water treatment facilities and plants to treat or pump water for domestic or industrial use. The appellants do not question their assignment to the 5409 occupation. The job grading standard for Water Treatment Plant Operating prescribes the title Water Treatment Plant Operator for jobs at grade 8 and above. As explained in the next section of this decision, the appellants' job is graded at the 9 level. Therefore, the appropriate title for the appealed job is Water Treatment Plant Operator.

Grade determination

The job grading standard for Water Treatment Plant Operating, 5409, defines work at the grade 7, 8, and 9 levels. It indicates that the level of skill and knowledge and other work requirements described may warrant grading above or below those levels.

The standard also notes that, because of possible adverse human health and environmental effects, many states have imposed strict certification requirements on water treatment plant operators. Certification of employees does not directly affect the difficulty or characteristics of work, such as skill and knowledge, responsibility, physical effort, and working conditions, which are considered in grading trades and labor jobs under the Federal Wage System. Consequently, certification requirements have no grade level impact.

The standard uses four factors for determining grade level: skill and knowledge, responsibility, physical effort, and working conditions. Our assessment of each factor follows.

Skill and knowledge

The appellants' work requires the skill and knowledge to operate, inspect, maintain, and troubleshoot the water plant equipment and various filtration systems. The water plant at [installation] is both a nonfiltration and filtration plant. Both filtration systems of the plant require chemicals to change the taste, odor, visual appearance, and chemical content of the water. [installation] systems include a reverse osmosis unit (filtration system), nine water wells, chemical feeders, hydrochlorinators, chlorinators, booster pumps, mixed media filters (which include anthrafil), pressure sand filters, overhead and ground storage tanks (settling tanks), chemical pumps, and swimming pools. The reverse osmosis system is a more complicated system that requires the operators to have knowledge of more complicated motors, gauges, and feeders. They are also responsible for maintaining several remote reverse osmosis systems at locations throughout the base such as the Officer's Club, Non-commissioned Officer's Club, the Base Exchange, and the base child care center. The appellants also maintain the base fire suppression system for the flight line. This system uses base well water which must also be treated. The appellants must know how to interpret data from the computer telemetry operating system in order to troubleshoot possible problems. They must also be able to visually spot problems with the equipment and related systems and filters. The appellants must have the skill to properly measure and introduce chemicals and compounds into the various water systems. They are required to know the effects of the chemicals used in the filtration process such as lime,

soda ash, fluorides, and chlorines. The appellants are required to perform water treatment tests to monitor levels of chlorine, total dissolved solids, fluoride, hardness, turbidity, and microbiological organisms. The appellants are also responsible for preventive and minor maintenance and repairs of equipment such as replacing packing, greasing pumps, and checking electrical wiring and motors. The appellants also replace various pumps as needed such as injector, feeder, or chlorine pumps.

The skill and knowledge required for the appellants' water treatment plant duties are comparable to the grade 9 level. As described in the standard, water treatment plant operators at the grade 9 level have a thorough knowledge of the filtration processes such as mixed media filters, slow sand filtration, gravity rapid sand, or anthrafilt filtration and pressure or diatomaceous earth filtration, normally associated with surface (lakes, rivers) water treatment. They have skill in measuring and introducing chemicals and compounds into the water. They are also aware of the effects of chemicals and compounds such as lime, soda ash, fluorides, and polyphosphates used in the filtration process. WG-9 operators perform water treatment tests and measurements that require a working knowledge of various microbiological organisms. They know how to treat incoming water and how to perform basic microbiological tests such as inoculation and incubation of outgoing water samples to verify elimination of treated microorganisms. They have skill in the operation of settling tanks, filter beds, surge pumps, hydrochlorinators, phosphate feeders, soda ash and dry lime feeders, lime solution tanks, and similar types of equipment. Water treatment operators at the 9 level also check the operation of plant equipment and accomplish minor repairs and maintenance such as replacing gaskets, bearings, piping, pump motors, and packing.

This factor is credited at the grade 9 level.

Responsibility

The appellants receive oral and written instructions from their supervisor. Information is also conveyed from shift operators to the operator on the next shift. The appellants have greater responsibility for mixing chemicals and compounds due to the reverse osmosis system located on the base. The appellants are required to complete monthly reports for the Air Force as well as monthly and annual reports on water well production for the State. They also have the responsibility for performing several water tests required by the State. These test results are then forwarded to the Environmental Office on the installation where they are then sent to the State agencies involved. The appellants are able to make decisions regarding operational status of the plant and its components during an emergency based on written guidance and their working knowledge. The appellants inform their supervisor when these instances occur and contact the Emergency Service Call Desk on base if additional civilian assistance is needed. As at the grade level 9, the appellants' supervisor reviews their work upon completion to check for compliance with instructions and standard operating procedures.

This factor is credited at the grade 9 level.

At the grade 9 level, *Physical effort* is the same as that described for grade 7 and *Working conditions* are the same as those described at grade 8. Because these two factors do not have

grade level impact and the appellants' work meets the levels described in the job grading standard, we will credit both factors as being met and will not discuss them further.

Special Additional Responsibilities

The 5409 job grading standard describes special circumstances which warrant additional grade credit for functioning as the "operator in charge" on second and third shifts and on weekends. The following conditions must be *fully* met to warrant the crediting of an additional grade.

1. The operator at the full performance level must be assigned shift responsibility on a regular and recurring basis. Only one operator on a shift can be assigned this responsibility.

The appellants work second and third shifts and weekends. The work schedule results in their serving as the only operator on these shifts although there may be military personnel present for a portion of the shift.

2. The operator follows written instructions supplied by the supervisor or by the "operator in charge" on the previous shift.

The appellants follow written instructions supplied by their supervisor.

3. The "operator in charge" typically performs duties which are more responsible and require a slightly higher level of skill and knowledge than the full performance level operators who are on duty where a supervisor is available. This includes a thorough knowledge of the entire utility system and the user requirements to locate problems and initiate immediate corrective action.

The base's reverse osmosis system requires the appellants to perform duties that are more responsible and require a higher level of skill and knowledge. They possess a thorough knowledge of the entire utility system as well as the computer telemetry operating system. They are able to locate problems and initiate immediate corrective action.

4. In the absence of written contingency procedures, the "operator in charge" has responsibility to decide whether to shut down the operation or attempt to bypass problems until corrective action has been completed if the equipment still in operation can handle the load.

Although the appellants are able determine corrective action, there *are* contingency plans and written operating procedures for the water treatment plant that indicate circumstances for well and equipment shut downs, which limits their discretion.

5. The "operator in charge" has responsibility to determine what work must be done and has the authority to approve overtime or call in necessary maintenance personnel. The operator is responsible for relaying instructions to the next shift operator including problems encountered and actions taken.

The fifth condition is not fully met as the appellants do not have the authority to approve overtime or to call in necessary *civilian* maintenance personnel. They must contact the Emergency Service Call Desk to request additional civilian assistance or that a contractor be called for a problem. The service desk then contacts the Group Commander or the Officer on Duty acting for the Unit Commander to receive authorization for additional personnel or overtime.

Because the appellants' job does not *fully* meet all five conditions, no additional credit for "operator in charge" duties and responsibilities is warranted.

Decision

The appellants' job is properly classified as Water Treatment Plant Operator, WG-5409-9.