

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



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

Classification Appeal Decision
Under Section 5112 of Title 5, United States Code

Appellant: [the appellant]

Agency classification: Agricultural Management Specialist
GS-475-11

Organization: [county] Office
[state] State Office
[area]
Farm Service Agency
U.S. Department of Agriculture
[city, state]

OPM decision: Agricultural Management Specialist
GS-475-11

OPM decision number: C- 0475-11-01

/s/ Judith L. Frenzel (for)
Bonnie J. Brandon
Classification Appeals Officer

12/11/97
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:

[the appellant]
[the appellant's address]
[city, state]

Chief
Personnel Division
[office]
Farm Service Agency
U.S. Department of Agriculture
[agency address]
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Director
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Director
Office of Human Resources Management
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Introduction

On August 12, 1997, the Dallas Oversight Division of the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM) received a classification appeal from [the appellant]. His position is currently classified as Agricultural Management Specialist, GS-475-11. However, he believes its classification should be Agricultural Management Specialist, GS-475-12. He works in the [location] County Office, [state] State Office, [area] Area, Farm Service Agency, U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). We have accepted and decided his appeal under section 5112 of title 5, United States Code.

To help decide the appeal, an Oversight Division representative conducted a phone audit of the appellant's position. The audit included interviews with the appellant and his immediate supervisor. In reaching our classification decision, we have reviewed the audit findings and all information of record furnished by the appellant and his agency, including his official position description 00NM1872.

Position information

The appellant directs the work of a first-level operating office which serves ten counties [counties] in [state]. In his role as Agriculture Credit Manager, the appellant carries out the Agriculture Credit Program which provides direct loans to eligible farmers and guaranteed loans made by commercial lenders for farm operating needs and farm ownership. The appellant's office provides supervised credit services to approximately 160 borrowers, many of which have loans in more than one category. Enterprises within the counties include both irrigated and dry land operations. Agricultural products include alfalfa, oats, hehari, barley, wheat, tomatoes, potatoes, pumpkins, squash, apples, beans, and corn. There are also livestock and dairy operations. Variation in geography and soil type and unpredictable weather conditions complicate farming operations in the counties served. Most operations are sole proprietorships; a few are partnerships, corporations, and associations. The operations involve private, State, and Federal leases, and a significant number of Indian reservations are located in the counties served.

The appellant is responsible for making and servicing loans. He provides professional advice, credit assistance, and technical guidance on agricultural operations to loan applicants and borrowers. He communicates and cooperates with representatives of other Federal, State, and tribal governments; banks; and business and community groups. The appellant provides technical and administrative supervision to one Agricultural Management Specialist, GS-475-11, and one Agricultural Credit Technician, GS-1101-7.

Series and title determination

We find the appellant's position is appropriately classified in the Agricultural Management Series, GS-475. This series was specifically developed for positions in the former Farmers Home Administration, of which the Agriculture Credit Program was a part. Under the U.S. Department of Agriculture's reorganization in 1994, the Agriculture Credit Program was transferred to the newly established Farm Service Agency. The GS-475 series includes positions involving performance of a broad range of professional agricultural functions associated with providing supervised credit and

technical assistance programs for agricultural enterprises and related rural activities. The appropriate title for positions in this series is Agricultural Management Specialist.

Standard determination

We find that the duties of the appellant's position are appropriately graded using the Position Classification Standard for the Agricultural Management Series, GS-475. As indicated earlier, the appellant provides technical and administrative supervision to two employees. Both the appellant and his supervisor estimate that his supervisory work comprises approximately 10 to 15 percent of his time. Application of the General Schedule Supervisory Guide is appropriate only when supervisory work occupies at least 25 percent of the position's time. Accordingly, because the appellant's supervisory responsibilities do not constitute a major duty occupying at least 25 percent of his time, his supervisory duties will not be considered or discussed further in our evaluation.

Grade determination

The GS-475 position classification standard is written in the Factor Evaluation System (FES) format, which employs nine factors. Each factor is evaluated separately and is assigned a point value consistent with factor level definitions described in the standard. The total points are converted to a grade by use of a grade conversion table. Under the FES, each factor level description describes the minimum characteristics needed to receive credit for the described level. Therefore, if a position fails to meet the criteria in a factor level description in any significant aspect, it must be credited at a lower level. Conversely, the position may exceed those criteria in some aspects and still not be credited at a higher level. Our evaluation with respect to the nine FES factors follows.

Factor 1, Knowledge required by the position

This factor measures the nature and extent of information of facts which the employee must understand to do acceptable work (e.g., steps, procedures, practices, rules, policies, theories, principles, and ideas) and the nature and extent of skills needed to apply those knowledges.

The knowledge required by the appellant's position is best evaluated at Level 1-7. Similar to workers at Level 1-7, the appellant needs knowledge of the concepts, principles, and practices of agricultural and credit management, the practical aspects of agricultural marketing, and a wide variety of sources of information about agricultural subjects and activities sufficient to approve and supervise loans and provide technical guidance and assistance to borrowers whose operations involve a wide variety of crops and livestock. Neither the appellant nor the agency disagrees with this finding.

Factor 2, Supervisory controls

This factor covers the nature and extent of direct or indirect controls exercised by the supervisor, the individual employee's responsibilities, and review of completed assignments.

Supervisory controls over the appellant's position are properly credited at level 2-4. Similar to that depicted in the standard at this level, the appellant independently plans and carries out assignments, resolves conflicts encountered, and keeps his supervisor informed of potentially controversial issues or those with broad program impact. Completed work is generally accepted as technically accurate and is periodically reviewed for achievement of program objectives, effectiveness, and compatibility with agency policies. Neither the appellant nor the agency disagrees with this finding.

Factor 3, Guidelines

This factor covers the nature of guidelines and the judgment needed to apply them.

The guidelines of the appealed position have been evaluated by the agency at Level 3-3. At Level 3-3, guidelines are available, but may not be completely applicable to the work or may have gaps in specificity. Guidelines include: national and State developed plans and procedures and published material regarding topics such as the economic value of farmland, farm equipment, and farm machinery; soil characteristics; technical characteristics of equipment and uses of equipment, fertilizers, feeds, and pesticides; and technical approaches to the uses of equipment, feeds, and chemicals. The employee interprets, selects, and adjusts agency program criteria, standards, specifications, and technical information. Each individual agricultural enterprise has its own unique characteristics requiring the employee to apply considerable judgment in applying guidelines for the performance of duties such as determining the key farm practices to be set as conditions of loans; advising borrowers on such topics as when to sell crops or equipment, or what operations to expand or curtail; and approving or disapproving the selling of equipment or crops.

The appellant contends that this factor should be evaluated at Level 3-4. At Level 3-4, the variety, complexity, and volume of the enterprises dealt with are such that guidelines are largely inapplicable for many individual cases, and the overall program of the office requires continuing modification of methods and practices to provide the full range of services to borrowers. The differences between Level 3-3 and Level 3-4 include the need of the employee to use greater initiative and resourcefulness in resolving unique problems which do not lend themselves to general agency guides, or in making a significant number of judgments concerning agricultural techniques and marketing decisions for a large and highly varied agricultural portfolio.

The appellant uses a variety of agricultural and financial guidelines, agency procedures, information gained from his attendance at livestock and equipment auctions, and local codes and regulations to carry out assignments. These guidelines are not completely applicable to the work. Because of the general nature of the guidelines, the appellant interprets and adapts guidelines for application to a variety of situations. He develops approaches to resolve situations not covered by guidelines.

The appellant cites his outreach work on negotiating with Indian tribes to establish working agreements and procedures for use in facilitating the granting of loans to Indian tribe members who live on reservations as an example of work which requires him to use a great deal of judgment and resourcefulness in applying and adjusting guidelines. In addition, he provides information concerning

situations in which he has advised borrowers on changes in marketing strategies. In one example provided, he advised a greenhouse to eliminate deliveries of potted plants to distant cities to reduce competition with larger growers and instead concentrate on smaller, tourist based towns. Other examples provided concern his advice to an alfalfa sprout grower/vegetable repack business to raise prices to twenty-five percent over cost in order to increase profits and his recommendation to a sheep grower on the need to conduct fertility tests on the herd. The appellant also believes that the weather conditions in the area, especially the snowstorms and drought experienced in recent years, require him to use considerable judgment in devising and recommending plans which will aid the borrowers in compensating for losses experienced during natural disasters, such as obtaining additional leases, and relocating or selling livestock. The appellant contends that the smaller, part-time operators offer additional challenge to his advisory role because of their lack of knowledge and failure to follow established agricultural and record-keeping practices.

The variety, complexity, and volume of the enterprises dealt with by the appellant are consistent with Level 3-3. The nature of enterprises dealt with is considered to the extent that it determines the judgment required in applying or adjusting guidelines. Most borrowers are individuals rather than partnerships or corporations, and developed marketing systems are available for most agricultural commodities. The situations he describes in which he has advised borrowers are not problems of such a unique nature that they require continually devising new techniques, developing methods, or significantly departing from established practice to resolve them, as depicted at Level 3-4 in the standard. Rather, they are more in concert with Level 3-3 in which guidelines are adapted to fit a specific situation. Overall, the agricultural environment of the counties served does not present the broad range of unique problems characteristic of Level 3-4. While his efforts to negotiate agreements with Indian tribes to expand the loan program to tribal members is novel and requires modification of agency practices to some extent, we find that the degree of judgment required by the appellant to interpret, select, and adjust guidelines on a regular basis is consistent with that described at Level 3-3.

Factor 4, Complexity

This factor covers the nature, number, variety, and intricacy of tasks, steps, processes, or methods in the work performed; the difficulty in identifying what needs to be done; and the difficulty and originality involved in performing the work.

The complexity of the appellant's work has been evaluated by the agency at Level 4-3. At Level 4-3, assignments typically require independent action involving the full range of services offered through the organizational entity which serves a limited range of agricultural enterprises. For example, the agricultural enterprises served are primarily small, simple, part-time operations generally involving a single type of agricultural activity, and the entire geographic area served typically includes a limited variety of operations.

The appellant believes the complexity of his work is equivalent to Level 4-4. At Level 4-4, assignments usually require independent action involving the full range of services offered through a county office. Offices at this level serve a substantial range, volume, and variety of agricultural

enterprises, requiring the specialist to assess a wide variety of circumstances and develop variations in approach for a diversified group of enterprises.

We find the complexity of the appellant's work is best evaluated at Level 4-4. The appellant's office provides the full range of loan services to 160 borrowers in a wide geographic area covering ten counties. The appellant provides supervised credit services to borrowers with farm operating loans which involves assisting in the development of annual operating plans and recommending changes to production and marketing strategies. There is a substantial range and variety of agricultural enterprises served for which the appellant must consider various factors when approving loans or recommending changes needed to insure the viability and profitability of the operations. The climate, geography, and soil conditions vary significantly in the counties covered in the serviced area, which affect the type of crops which can be grown in certain areas, the length of the crop seasons, and livestock grazing methods. The enterprises serviced utilize several types of irrigation systems and involve dry land operations for which the type of farm equipment utilized and agricultural techniques vary. There is a substantial range of livestock operations in the area which include beef, dairy stock and products, hogs, chicken and organic eggs, ostrich, emu, sheep stock and products, and goats. A wide variety of crops are grown in the serviced counties, such as wheat, oats, rye, barley, alfalfa, hegari, potatoes, tomatoes, squash, peppers, melons, grapes, pinto beans, apples, cherries, apricots, peaches, and pinion nuts.

Factor 5, Scope and effect

This factor covers the relationship between the nature of the agricultural management work, i.e., the purpose, breadth, and depth of the assignment, and the effect of the work on the agricultural community, including farmers, ranchers, bankers, real estate agents, officials of other USDA agencies, and officials of local and State governments.

This factor has been evaluated by the agency at Level 5-3. At this level, work typically consists of professional and administrative assignments to advise individual producers on the evaluation of their resources and development of appropriate plans for their enterprises. The specialist assists potential borrowers in the development of financial and operating plans; advises on specific agricultural practices, techniques and marketing plans; and approves or disapproves loan applications. The work affects the economic well-being of farmers, ranchers, and their families.

The appellant believes this factor should be evaluated at Level 5-4. At Level 5-4, employees complete projects of such scope and complexity that substantial effort must be devoted to establishing criteria; formulating projects or management plans and controls; assessing program effectiveness; or analyzing a wide variety of unusual and complex problems. The work affects programs with widespread coverage or organizational entities of such extensive and pervasive significance to the local economy that local lending institutions and a wide range of large and complex agricultural enterprises depend heavily upon agency programs. At this level, the volume of agricultural loans is high (e.g., 200 farm borrowers), and the borrowers served include a broad range of agricultural

enterprises (e.g., in terms of size, kinds of agricultural products, nature of ownership, nature of operation, and debt structure.)

The purpose of the appealed position is to manage a supervised farm credit program. This includes approving and disapproving the full range of loans offered through the program, and developing agricultural financial planning instruments to assist borrowers evaluate their resources and plan for production and marketing of their agricultural products. The work has an economic impact on agricultural producers and their families.

We find the scope and effect of the appealed position is properly evaluated at Level 5-3. The volume of loans for which the appellant is responsible is substantially less than that depicted at Level 5-4, and most borrowers are individuals or joint operations (spouses) rather than partnerships or corporations. While the enterprises involve a wide range of livestock, a variety of crops, and varying agricultural techniques are used, the operations do not pose a wide variety of unusual and complex problems. Instead, the appellant generally resolves problems by recommending the use of standard agricultural and marketing practices, such as when he advises to fertilize crops, vaccinate livestock, increase selling prices, or change where products are sold. Although the appellant is initiating efforts to establish working agreements and procedures with Tribal governments which may result in the expansion of the agriculture credit program by extending loans to tribal members, agreements have presently been reached with only four of the twenty Indian tribes in the serviced area. Lending institutions and large and complex agricultural enterprises are not affected by agency programs to the extent described at Level 5-4.

Factor 6, Personal contacts

This factor includes face-to-face contacts and telephone and radio dialogue with persons not in the supervisory chain. Levels described under this factor are based on what is required to make the initial contact, the difficulty of communicating with those contacted, and the setting in which the contact takes place.

We find that the appellant's contacts meet Level 6-3. Neither the appellant nor the agency disagrees with this finding. Like that described in the standard at this level, the appellant's contacts are with individuals or groups from outside the agency in moderately unstructured settings, e.g., members of county committees, representatives of other Federal agencies, State and municipal agencies, and tribal governments; banks and other lenders; contractors; attorneys; private businesses, and public action groups.

Factor 7, Purpose of contacts

This factor measures the purpose of the personal contacts which are the basis for the level selected for Factor 6.

The purpose of the appellant's contacts is properly evaluated at Level 7-3. Neither the appellant nor the agency disagrees with this determination. At Level 7-3, the purpose of the contacts is to persuade, influence, and encourage individuals hard to convince or indecisive to agree upon agricultural management goals and objectives. The appellant is required to overcome initial reluctance of individuals by emphasizing agricultural and financial gains which may be accomplished through adoption of a specific course or courses of action. The appellant uses tact and diplomacy in achieving working consensus among parties who have dissimilar opinions and/or goals.

Factor 8, Physical Demands

This factor covers the requirements and physical demands placed on the employee by the work assignment.

The physical demands on the appellant meets Level 8-2. Neither the appellant nor the agency disagrees with this finding. For instance, as is typical at this level, his work requires regular and recurring physical exertion related to agricultural management work such as walking on rough terrain, jumping ditches and furrows, or climbing steep banks.

Factor 9, Work Environment

This factor considers the risk and discomfort in the employee's physical surroundings or the nature of the work assigned and the safety regulations required.

The appellant's work environment is evaluated at Level 9-2. Neither the appellant nor the agency disagrees with this determination. Like that described in the standard at this level, his work involves regular and recurrent exposure to operating agricultural equipment, adverse weather such as snow and icy roads and field conditions, unimproved roads, etc. Protective equipment is necessary on construction sites.

Summary

The following table summarizes our evaluation of the appellant's position:

Factor	Level	Points
1. Knowledge required by the position	1-7	1250
2. Supervisory controls	2-4	450
3. Guidelines	3-3	275
4. Complexity	4-4	225
5. Scope and effect	5-3	150
6. Personal contacts	6-3	60
7. Purpose of contacts	7-3	120
8. Physical demands	8-2	20
9. Work environment	9-2	20
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Total points:		2570

The total points assigned to the appellant's position equals 2570 . Therefore, in accordance with the grade conversion table in the standard, the position is properly graded at GS-11.

Decision

The appellant's position is properly classified as Agricultural Management Specialist, GS-475-11.