

U. S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
SOIL CONSERVATION SERVICE

POSITION EVALUATION

Date of Audit
June 3, 1991

Present Title,
Series and Grade: Supervisory Agricultural Economist, GM-110-14
Head, ESS Staff

Recommendation: Reclassify as Supervisory Agricultural Economist,
GM-110-15

Incumbent: Douglas A. Christensen No. RM-1613

Location: Economics and Social Sciences Staff, Midwest National
Technical Center, Lincoln, NE

The position is that of Staff Head, ESS Staff, MNTC. The incumbent supervises two GM-13 agricultural economists, a GM-13 cultural resources specialist, and a GS-6 secretary. An additional position, sociologist, GM-13, is to be added to the staff. The staff provides economics and cultural resources technical assistance to the 12 Midwest states. In addition, the incumbent and staff specialists also carry agency-wide responsibilities.

One staff economist has national responsibility in developing software for FOCS dealing with economic considerations in irrigation. The other staff economist has SCS economics leadership in the farm management area, including parts of the Field Office Technical Guide (FOTG) and economics course development for field offices. The Cultural Resources Specialist is responsible for policy, components of FOTG and Conservation Planning Manual and other areas of his specialty.

Supervision of the staff is estimated to require 25% of the incumbent's time. However, the predominant and grade controlling feature is the professional economics assignment. After discussions with the MNTC Director on priorities and general timing, the incumbent assigns special projects to staff members. These are infrequent, with most work being planned and carried out independently by the specialists. They determine their individual work priorities and the approach to be used. Early in the year, the incumbent meets with each to decide overall priorities and assist in scheduling assistance trips to states. The incumbent furnishes little technical guidance, with most of this coming from their counterparts in other agencies or organizations. Supervisory functions of the incumbent are considered secondary to his personal technical responsibilities as an agricultural economist.

Agency-wide economics responsibilities of this position amount to 75% of available time. They can be divided into three categories: range economics, management of the "CARE" database (Cost and Returns Estimator), and international agricultural trade economics. Responsibilities in these areas often involve serving as the SCS representative on interagency or other work groups, task forces or committees. Range economics work involves about 15% of available time. The incumbent is designated as the national SCS leader for range economics. He serves as the SCS representative on the Range Economics Committee, along with university and other agency representatives. Their purpose is to accumulate information, disseminate it, and eventually influence legislation in this area. They have issued several publications and held two symposiums (at Society for Range Management national meetings.) The next step is to develop a series of articles for legislators' information. The incumbent gathers information, nationwide, using the SCS field office network. Other agency representatives on the committee have expressed differing viewpoints on resource inventory activities, requiring efforts by the incumbent to change their opinions. The committee serves as a national clearinghouse for information on range economics.

About 45% of available time is spent as the SCS project manager for software development in economic cost and returns. The incumbent is also responsible for administration of this economics area in present and proposed programs. For example on RCA cost and returns activity, he designed a system to retrieve information at area and higher levels, determined its use, insured integrity of the economics data and its proper use.

In carrying out this nationwide assignment, the incumbent reports to the Deputy Chief of Technology and the Deputy Chief for Programs at NHQ. He briefs them and the MNTC Director periodically. Cost and returns information is the mainstay of economics work in SCS.

As CARE database manager, he heads a software development team consisting of four contractors, MNTC computer specialist, staff economist, etc. They periodically meet as a group and exchange calls on an almost daily basis. Their objective is to develop cost and return software in FOCS (2.0 version) by 1992. This will allow all SCS field offices to develop cost/benefit information from SCS recommendations, which will be expressed from the farmer's viewpoint. As new hardware and databases are available, new programs will be developed and improved versions of the software made available throughout SCS. The CARE (Cost and Return Estimator) software package developed by SCS was publicized in the Farm Journal, Successful Farmer, the Journal of Soil and Water Conservation, and numerous professional society proceedings. As project manager, he has been contacted for copies of the software by many state universities, ERS, agencies in Washington, D.C., John Deere Company, farm journals, economists in Canada, Venezuela, Japan, Tasmania and Czechoslovakia, among others. The top staffer for the Senate Agricultural Committee contacted him for software and analysis in relation to the farm bill.

The Great Plains Agricultural Council established a Task Force for Education on International Trade. In 1989, the Chief nominated the incumbent to serve on the task force. It was organized in 1990 and included representatives of universities and agriculture experiment stations in 9 states and representatives of SCS, FS, ERS, ES, ARS and AMS. The incumbent provides an annual briefing to the Chief on task force activities. The incumbent makes recommendations related to the GATT (General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade). This is a multilateral agreement establishing a code of rules governing international trade and providing a forum for reducing trade barriers. He must be sensitive to the Chief's viewpoints in order to make decisions and recommendations in this area. The task force is working toward developing legislation in this area. As a member, his statements must be especially politically accurate and reflect the Chief's position. A workshop was recently held in Denver, Colorado. The incumbent participated and invited speakers for it. He keeps abreast of related developments from a computer news service and discussions with the task force chairman. About 15% of his time is spent on this work.

Midwest area technical responsibilities, related to economics, include assistance trips to the states as well as telephone conversations, training sessions in states, and annual Midwest economics workshops. The incumbent provides overall direction and moderates this workshop. Cultural resources workshops are held, with sociology workshops held jointly with Northeastern states. Other Midwest activities directed or carried out by the incumbent are publishing articles on farm management or others such as residue management and effects on soil loss. Some are based on academic research he carried out in past years.

The incumbent has also rewritten the Conservation Operations position of the SCS Economics Handbook, which is used throughout the agency.

Evaluation

This position requires application of professional knowledge in economics to perform a variety of duties, including economic research, publication of economic information, data analysis, software development, advice and consultation in this area. Positions with these responsibilities are classified within the GS-110, Economist Series.

While the GS-110 classification standard provides grade level criteria from GS-5 through GS-15, it does not reflect current situations. Evaluation is supplemented by additional use of a related series dealing with technical work of the agency, the GS-457, Soil Conservation Series.

Evaluation through use of the GS-110 standard requires consideration of several factors (scope of assignment, technical complexity and responsibility).

Scope of Assignment

As described at the GS-14 level in the standard, the position involves responsibility for formulating and guiding major research attacks on problems of great difficulty and critical importance. The incumbent developed and carries out software development and other economics activities dealing with the Food Security Act and major SCS programs, reaching all Service offices. At the GS-15 level, the standard provides that economists assume responsibility for economic research of great importance, significance and difficulty, which frequently contributes new insights into the dynamics and relationships of an economic society. They furnish economic advice and counsel from planning and execution of policy to drafting of proposed economic legislation. In the subject position, the incumbent provides direct economic advisory services to the Chief, Deputy Chiefs, MNTC Directors and other managers. Work on cost/returns and the emerging area of agricultural international trade brings the incumbent into new areas of economic consideration. Work products such as "CARE" which are developed are sought by other countries, agencies, and universities as providing new approaches in the field. This factor is evaluated at the GS-15 level.

Responsibility

At the GS-14 level, economists are authoritative technical advisors within the area of their assignment. They are responsible to insure that policy makers are provided with accurate, properly analyzed economic information. The incumbent functions in a manner that fully meets their description.

At the GS-15 level, economists also have demonstrated outstanding attainment within their fields. They are responsible for the integrity of economic data. This is true in the case of the subject position where economic data received through some 3,000 SCS field locations must be analyzed and verified before use. The incumbent is responsible for its integrity, especially in cost/returns software, making statements for the Chief on Agricultural International Trade, etc. Efforts can have an impact of major national activities such as development of economic software for use in all counties of the nation, and by many farmers in these locations. This position has a level of responsibility which is quite significant since it functions as a national economics expert for the agency. Utilization of economic products developed by the incumbent, by other countries, indicates the high level of trust and reliance on the integrity of his work. This factor is evaluated at the GS-15 level.

The overall evaluation under the GS-110, Economist, standard is at the GS-15 level.

An additional evaluation, cross-referencing with the GS-457, Soil Conservation, standard follows:

Factor 1, Knowledge Required by the Position Level 1-9 1850 points

The incumbent deals with emerging agency functions of national magnitude (Farm Bill, FSA, CAMPS/FOCS) and generates new concepts such as "CARE" package to bring economic considerations into individual farm management situations through computer processing by local soil conservationists or to provide a basis for various universities to expand services by their extension service or research stations. The incumbent is recognized as a national specialist in agricultural economics.

Factor 2, Supervisory Controls Level 2-5 650 points

As described earlier, the position operates with an unusual degree of independence. The supervisor, MNTC Director, discusses broad objectives and goals which are usually provided by NHQ. The incumbent sets his own priorities of work, determines those areas most productive and proceeds with the work. Special assignments may be provided by NHQ. The incumbent keeps the Chief and Deputies briefed on assignment progress related to them. He keeps the Director of the MNTC and the Director of Economics and Social Sciences Division (NHQ) abreast of developments but only to provide a general overview of work. Sources of technical guidance are usually outside the agency and include the head agricultural economist in the Congressional Budget Office. Another source is the senior economist with the Federal Reserve Bank in Kansas City who provides advance information on interest rates, debt load, other agr. economics information. SCS software equations contain interest rate and depreciation factors which are changeable based on the economy.

Factor 3, Guidelines Level 3-5 650 points

In the areas of range economics and international trade, the incumbent relies on existing legislation and interpretations from the Senate Agriculture Subcommittee dealing with the Farm Bill as guidelines. Existing policy in other areas of economics and an annual briefing by the Chief set guidelines for those activities. The incumbent personally assesses needs, does economic research and develops technical guidance for SCS program participants and others outside the agency.

Factor 4, Complexity Level 4-6 450 points

As described at this factor level, the work involves broad assignments in areas where conservation issues are not fully defined. Considerable analytical effort is carried out in various stages and action may depend on other supporting efforts, within and outside the agency.

Factor 5, Scope and Effect Level 5-6 450 points

The purpose is to plan and develop program procedures which are often agency-wide or government-wide and often contribute to the development of legislation. The efforts of the incumbent affect program administration of USDA and the Service.

Factor 6, Personal Contacts Level 6-4 110 points

Personal contacts include many of those described at level 6-4 (senior executive officials: key staff of members of Congress: state university officials: representatives of economics departments in other countries: senior agency representatives of ARS, ERS, ES, FS, BLM: Congressional Budget Office, etc.) and the intent of this level is met.

Factor 7, Purpose of Contacts Level 7-3 120 points

Most personal contact deal with attempts to influence or persuade and not the negotiation of formal agreements, as described at level 7-4.

Factor 8, Physical Demands Level 8-1 5 points

The work is mainly sedentary. Trips and meeting attendance involve normal exertion in walking, sitting, and carrying lightweight objects.

Factor 9, Work Environment Level 9-1 5 points

The work is carried out in a modern office setting with adequate heating, lighting, ventilation, and safety precautions.

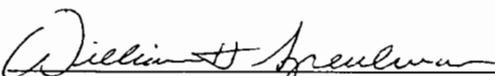
Total Points - 4,290

The standard provides a grade conversion chart that converts this point total to GS-15. The point range for GS-15 positions is 4,055 and higher.

Based on the evaluations under the GS-110 standard and a cross-series evaluation under the GS-457 standard, the position is evaluated at the GS-15 level.

Conclusion:

The position should be reclassified as Agricultural Economist, GM-110-15.


WILLIAM H. SPEALMAN
Human Resources Manager

GERALD D. WATERS
Administrative Officer