

**Forest Service Handbook
National Headquarters - Washington Office
Washington, DC**

**Forest Service Handbook 6109.15 – Position Classification Handbook
Chapter 30 - Classification of Positions Under The Scientist Career Plan**

Amendment: 6109.15-2017-1

Effective date: October 18, 2017

Duration: This amendment is effective until superseded or removed.

Approved by: Robert Velasco, II, Acting Deputy Chief, Ops

Date approved: October 16, 2017

Responsible Staff:

Last Change: Amendment 6109.15-1996-3, to 6109.15 Contents

Superseded Document(s): Amendment 6109.15-93-2, September 7, 1993; 10--1 thru 19-2, April 1987; Amend 6, 20 thru 27--4, April 1987; Amend 6, 6109.15, 30 Contents, Amendment 6109.15-95-1, November 22, 1995; 6109.15, 30, Amendment 6109.15-95-2, November 22, 1995; 6109.15, 40 Contents, Amendment 6109.15-93-3, September 7, 1993; 6109.15, 40, Amendment 6109.15-93-4, September 7, 1993; 6109.15, 50 Contents, Amendment 6109.15-96-1, November 1, 1996; 6109.15, 50, Amendment 6109.15-96-2, November 1, 1996

Digest: Following is an explanation of the changes throughout the directive by section.

6109.15: Revises Handbook in its entirety.

Zero Code: Updates the zero code and incorporates applicable direction from FSM 6151.

6109.15_10: Combines Chapter 10, Forest Service Classification Principles, Practices, and Techniques, and Forest Service Manual 6151, Position Classification and Job Evaluation, and revises in their entirety.

6109.15_20: Combines Chapters 20, Position Description Preparation and Requirements, and Chapter 40, Standard Position Description System, and revises in their entirety.

6109.15_30: Updates Chapter 30, Classification of Positions under the Scientist Career Plan, to reflect changes in the Research Grade Evaluation Guide which was revised by the United States Office of Personnel Management in September 2006.

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6109.15_40: Removes Chapter 40, Standard Position Description System, and recodes applicable direction to Chapter 20, Position Description Preparation and Requirements.

6109.15_50: Removes Chapter 50, Classification of Positions Using “Impact-of-the-Person-on-the-Job” Concept, and incorporates applicable direction in Chapter 10, Section 13, Reclassification of Encumbered Positions.

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31 - Professional Research Work

The degree of personal scientific capability, creativity, and critical judgment greatly influences scientific accomplishments and therefore the overall evaluation of positions engaged in professional research work. Classification of these positions shall consider the researcher's total contribution and stature as they impact the current research assignment, in combination with other traditional classification factors such as scope and complexity of the research assignment, and degree of originality and creativity required. Because of the unique interaction between the research assignment and individual scientific capabilities and accomplishments, work may be performed at any one of several grade levels depending on incumbent's impact on the assignment.

Professional research work shall be classified in accordance with the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) *Research Grade Evaluation Guide* (RGEG); OPM *Equipment Development Grade Evaluation Guide* (EDGEG), *Part III - Experimental Development*; and *Forest Service Guide for Preparing Research Scientist Position Descriptions and Conducting Research Grade Evaluation Panels*.

31.1 - Scientist Career Plan

Positions meeting criteria for one of the following groups are covered by the Scientist Career Plan. Proper group placement is based on characteristics of the assignment as described in Factor 1 and Factor 3 of the position description.

1. Group 1 - Research Positions

Group 1 includes positions performing professional research work as defined in the *Research Grade Evaluation Guide* (RGEG), Part 1.

2. Group 2 - Equipment Development Positions

Group 2 includes positions in physical sciences and engineering disciplines falling within coverage of the *Equipment Development Grade Evaluation Guide* (EDGEG), *Part III - Experimental Development*.

3. Mixed Positions

- a. Mixed positions consisting of both research and equipment development are placed in Group 1 if equipment development activity is a short-term continuation of the research cycle.
- b. Positions emphasizing development activities other than equipment development which meet RGEG research criteria are placed in Group 1.
- c. Mixed positions which include both research and equipment development are placed in Group 2 if the equipment development activities are predominant.

d. Some positions consist of responsibilities excluded from the Scientist Career Plan, but also include a substantial personal research assignment. Such positions may be covered by this plan provided that:

(1) The research assignment constitutes at least 50 percent of the position's time; and the position is evaluated using the RGEG and the panel review process.

(2) The position description is written in four factor format and clearly describes the research assignment and use and/or development of new theory and methods in accomplishments.

31.2 - Exclusions to Scientist Career Plan

Positions which do not meet criteria for inclusion in one of the groups described in preceding section 31.1 are excluded from the Scientist Career Plan. Exclusions include:

1. Professional, scientific positions engaged in:
 - a. Resource management planning, implementation, or monitoring designed to attain a desired outcome, situation, or condition;
 - b. Providing advice on resource management;
 - c. Performing analyses of resource information using established guides, precedents, methods, or practices;
 - d. Managing and administering research and development programs; or
 - e. Development activities not meeting research or equipment development criteria.
2. Positions that involve:
 - a. Limited elements of research work, such as studies confined to description and interpretation of data;
 - b. Primarily literature and data search;
 - c. Primarily field surveys to collect or report scientific data; or
 - d. Use of existing procedures for data manipulation.
3. Project Leaders, Team Leaders, or Program Managers who perform consulting and other professional and management functions, but do not have a significant personal research assignment.
4. Resource evaluation positions that do not include a research assignment.

32 - Research Grade Evaluation Panels

Evaluation panels shall be used to provide Human Resources Specialists with technical advice and counsel needed to assign correct grade levels for professional research positions evaluated by the RGEG and the EDGE, Part III.

Mini-panels are conducted to confirm final grade of vacant research scientist positions, and post-doctoral associates or term positions based on the personal qualifications of the person selected for the position.

The Human Resources Specialist determines the series and title in accordance with guidance provided by the *Introduction to the Position Classification Standards, The Classifier's Handbook*, and applicable position classification standard.

Positions that fall below the grade levels covered by RGEG or Part III of EDGE are classified according to the standard or guide for the series of the position.

Final approval authority for panel results rests with respective Station Director or Deputy Chief for Research and Development. The USDA Office of Human Resources Management (OHRM) retains final approval authority for Scientific Technical (ST) panel results.

32.1 - Composition of the Research Grade Evaluation Panel

Panel members will be selected from a group of qualified and trained researchers. Qualification requirements for panel members are detailed in the *Forest Service Guide for Preparing Research Scientist Position Descriptions and Conducting Research Grade Evaluation Panels*.

Each panel shall consist of six members, including four rating members and two non-rating members, as follows:

1. Two rating panelists must be from the same peer group or related field of research as the position being evaluated. One of these panelists is named Subject Matter Reviewer (SMR) and assigned responsibility to:
 - a. Clarify for other panelists written information in the position description, such as jargon.
 - b. Contact users and peers in their field to assure full understanding of the impact and significance of a scientist's accomplishments.
 - c. Present a summary of user and peer interviews to panel members at the beginning of the panel.
2. Two rating panelists should be selected from a different peer group or field of research to ensure evaluations are representative of the broader research structure.
3. Two non-rating members shall include the Panel Chair and a Human Resources Specialist. Panel Chairs shall be experienced panelists and need not be from the same or

related discipline as the scientist whose position is being evaluated. Human Resources Specialists shall be knowledgeable of the RGEG, the EDGEG and the Forest Service panel process; and shall have appropriate delegated classification authority.

Mini-panels shall consist of two scientists knowledgeable of work under review, and a Human Resources Specialist with appropriate delegated classification authority.

The immediate supervisor shall not serve as a panel member. The supervisor may supply specific information to the SMR as part of the contact interview. The Panel Chair may request the supervisor's response to additional questions gathered from panel members.

Panel members shall be free of any conflict of interest or perceived conflict of interest with scientist being paneled. A conflict of interest exists if the relationship interferes with or it is perceived that the relationship may interfere with the panelist's ability to rate the scientist objectively. A conflict of interest would include, but is not limited to:

1. Working together on a recent project or publishing together within the last 3 years.
2. Having supervised or been supervised by the scientist.
3. Having a personal, non-work relationship with the scientist.
4. Having negative feelings about the scientist.

Panels using the Equipment Development Grade Evaluation Guide shall include rating members who are familiar with this guide.

32.2 - Research Grade Evaluation Panel Review Cycle

Positions covered by the Scientific Career Plan may change significantly over time and shall be reviewed periodically to ensure classification accuracy. This classification review is mandatory and may result in a change in grade level or change to a non-research position. Periodic panel reviews are conducted as follows:

1. Within 36 months of hire.
2. Every 48 months at grades GS-13 and below.
3. Every 60 months at grades GS-14 and above.
4. Scientific Technical (ST) level positions are not subject to periodic panel review.

Station Directors or Deputy Chief for Research and Development may request accelerated panels for any scientist before required minimum timeframes described above. They may also request re-evaluation prior to mandatory periodic reviews (sec. 33.3 Re-evaluations).

Delay in scheduling due to a significant impact experienced by a scientist (e.g., transfer of station, long-term detail such as an Intergovernmental Personnel Act (IPA) assignment, change in research assignment, or reassignment to a new research work unit) may also be requested.

32.3 - Research Grade Evaluation Panel Process

Notification of mandatory periodic review shall be issued each fiscal year by the Research and Development Human Resources Service Team (sec. 32.2). The scientist shall prepare a position description and an updated record of qualifications and research contributions following the format in the *Forest Service Guide for Preparing Research Scientist Position Descriptions and Conducting Research Grade Evaluation Panels*.

Panel members shall evaluate the four factors in the position description using factor level definitions in RGEG or EDGE, Part III; and shall attempt to reach consensus on rating of each factor. Consensus is reached when three of four rating panel members agree on rating of a factor; and the fourth panel member rates within one level (higher or lower) of other panel members, and does not object to the majority rating. Based on overall appraisal of the job-incumbent relationship, the panel may:

1. **Reach Agreement on Evaluation.** The panel reaches consensus to recommend classification at the next higher grade level (Promote), the current grade (Remain in Grade), or the next lower grade (Scored Below Grade). The panel must provide justification for the recommendation.
2. **Determine RGEG or EDGE Is Not Applicable.** The panel determines that the scientist is not performing all elements of professional research or development as defined by the RGEG or EDGE. Either assignment must be changed to permit performance of an actual research or development assignment or the position must be reclassified. The appropriate option should be implemented within 60 days.
3. **Reach No Decision.**
 - a. The panel does not have sufficient factual information upon which to render a fair evaluation when applying the guide criteria; or there are sufficient discrepancies between the position description and information gathered from users and peers by the SMR to preclude a fair evaluation. The panel shall determine if information gaps or discrepancies exist and recommend revision of the position description and resubmission for evaluation.
 - b. The panel is unable to reach consensus on one or more factors. Majority and minority reports are prepared for the factor(s) in dispute, signed by the respective panelists, and submitted jointly by the Panel Chair and Human Resources Specialist to the Station Director or Deputy Chief for Research and Development. The Station Director or Deputy Chief shall review panel results, and provide the Human Resources Specialist with a recommendation as to proper evaluation; or request another panel. This recommendation shall become part of the documentation supporting the evaluation of the position.

33 - Research Grade Evaluation Panel Results

33.1 - Communication of Results

Results of the panel evaluation are confidential. The Panel Chair and Human Resources Specialist shall communicate results jointly to the Station Director or Deputy Chief for Research and Development who shall notify responsible supervisor for each employee or position evaluated. The responsible supervisor shall discuss results of evaluation and any proposed actions resulting from the evaluation with employee within 30 days of receipt of panel evaluation results.

Individual files for each scientist covered by the Scientist Career Plan will be retained by the Human Resources Service Team exercising delegated classification authority for the Forest Service Research and Development organization. The classification file can be maintained as hard copy documents, as electronic files, or as a combination of both.

33.2 - Positions Operating Below Grade Level

When final classification results in a grade level lower than the current grade of incumbent, the following procedure applies:

1. If the lower grade is due to changes in the research assignment, action must be initiated under Title 5, CFR, Part 351, which applies to reduction-in-force.
2. If the lower grade is due to substandard performance, action must be initiated under Title 5, CFR, Part 430, and must be taken in accordance with procedures in the *Forest Service Guide for Resolving Scientist's Performance Problems*.

33.3 - Re-evaluations

The Station Director or Deputy Chief for Research and Development may request a panel evaluation after 90 days have elapsed following the last evaluation and before the normal periodic review, whenever significant changes in qualifications and accomplishments are demonstrated, or a major change in the scientist's assignment occurs. Major changes include reassignment to a different line of research, to a different research work unit, or from a scientist to a Project Leader, Team Leader, or Program Management position. Minor changes, such as a detail assignment or a new informal team assignment, do not warrant re-evaluation.

33.4 - Classification Reviews

Employees covered by the Scientific Career Plan may request reconsideration of results of a research panel evaluation. A new evaluation shall be scheduled as soon as possible. A new Panel Chair and new panel members shall be used.

33.5 - Classification Appeals

Any employee covered by the Scientist Career Plan may appeal the classification of the position to which the employee is currently assigned. An appeal may be filed directly with USDA or OPM at any time (FSH 6109.15, ch.10, sec. 15.2).

34 - Relationship to Grades of Supervisors

The grade of a research position is based on a high degree of technical independence, personal creativity, professional recognition, and contribution. Because of this; it is recognized that a research position may be properly classified at the same or higher grade than the work of the supervisor.

35 - Relationship to Merit Promotion Plan

Once a research scientist enters into a research position at entry level or above, they become subject to the panel review cycle. The scientist is paneled within 36 months of hire, and may request an early panel.

Reassignments and promotions above GS-11, including changes from scientist to Project Leader or Team Leader positions, may be noncompetitive when the grade level and/or potential for promotion are clearly based on the increased impact of the researcher's qualifications and contributions on the position. The following criteria must be met:

1. The predominant activity of the position is to perform or lead all elements of research or development as defined by the RGEG and the EDGEG.
2. There is a clear requirement for exercise of creativity and critical judgment, which may materially affect the nature of the end product.
3. The qualifications, stature, and contributions of the incumbent have a direct and major impact on the scope and complexity of the work performed.
4. Research capability, as demonstrated by graduate education and/or research experience, is the primary basis for selecting a candidate.

Cases where the predominant activity of the position is not research as defined by the RGEG, or where research competence and scientific accomplishment of the individual are not the primary basis for the higher grade are processed in accordance with DR 4030-335-002, Merit Promotion and Internal Placement.

36 - Vacant Positions

Vacant positions do not necessarily retain the grade of the previous incumbent. A vacant position at GS-11 and above, including Research Project Leader, may be advertised at the tentative grade to which it evaluates on the basis of minimum qualifications. It may also be advertised in a grade range with final classification based on mini-panel evaluation of the person selected for the position.

Prior to announcement of a vacancy, Factors 1, 2, 3A, and 3B of the vacant position description should be evaluated by a Human Resources Specialist with appropriate delegated authority for research positions to determine if the factors support the grade or grade range proposed for the advertisement.

The final grade of vacant research scientist positions and post-doctoral associates or term positions is confirmed by a mini-panel as soon as possible after selection, and prior to the scientist's reporting for duty. Final grade is based on personal qualifications of the person selected for the position as described in Factor 4 (Contributions, Impact, and Stature) of the position description.

37 - Effect of Privacy Act

The evaluation of scientists under the Scientist Career Plan includes personal information covered by the Privacy Act of 1974. Scientists shall be provided with a copy of the "Privacy Act Notice for Preparation of Factor 4," which is included in the *Forest Service Guide for Preparing Research Scientist Position Descriptions and Conducting Research Grade Evaluation Panels*.

1. To ensure the scientist has received a copy of this notice, the following statement must be included at the end of any newly prepared Factor 4:

"I have received a copy of the Privacy Act Notice for Preparation of Factor 4, Qualifications and Scientific Contributions, Research Scientist Position Description."

[Scientist's Signature]

2. Under the Privacy Act, Factor 4 information cannot be released for any other purpose without written consent of the incumbent. Since Factors 1, 2, and 3 document the research assignment, and do not contain personal information about the incumbent, they may be used for other purposes without consent of the incumbent.
3. Under the Privacy Act, the Forest Service will provide to a scientist upon written request any records it maintains regarding a scientist's panel evaluation. This includes names of the panel Chair and panel members, the panel's consensus scoring, and any related correspondence.