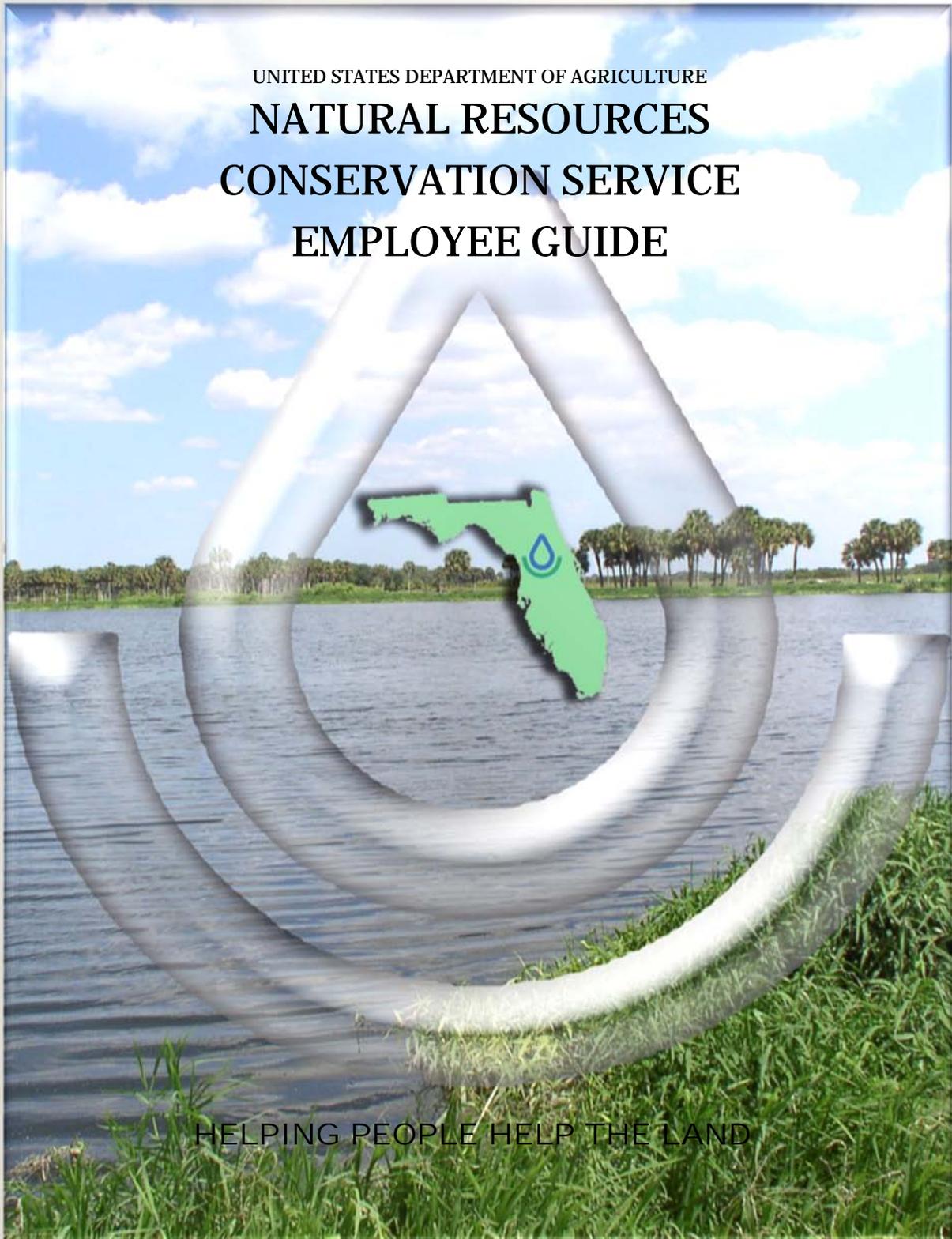


UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
**NATURAL RESOURCES
CONSERVATION SERVICE
EMPLOYEE GUIDE**



HELPING PEOPLE HELP THE LAND

United States Department of Agriculture



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Dear NRCS Employee:

Whether you are new to Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) or you are transferring here from outside Florida, welcome to the Sunshine State! I am confident that you will find Florida to be an excellent place to live, work, and play.



In addition to welcoming you to NRCS in Florida, I would also like to introduce you to the enclosed NRCS Florida Employee Handbook. It provides a general overview on a wide variety of subjects related to your employment with NRCS. I think you will find it to be a helpful orientation, as well as a long term useful tool.

From pay and benefits to administrative policies and common acronyms, you will find a wealth of resources in the following pages. In each section, you will also find references to more detailed information available on-line. If you have questions that are not addressed in this guide, I encourage you to seek additional guidance and clarification from your supervisor and/or the Human Resources staff.

NRCS has distinguished itself as a technical leader over the years by helping people manage and protect the soil and water resources of the nation. Our challenges are many, but together with our partners and cooperators we will continue in our mission of "Helping People Help the Land."

NRCS has adopted the following six Mission Goals, which were developed with input and advice from our partners and stakeholders:

1. High Quality, Productive Soil
2. Clean and Abundant Water
3. Healthy Plant and Animal Communities
4. Clean Air
5. An Adequate Energy Supply
6. Working Farm and Ranch Land

If you are new to the agency, I wish you the best in your career. If you are a seasoned NRCS veteran, thank you for your continued excellence and dedication.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Carlos Suarez".

Carlos Suarez
State Conservationist

Helping People Help the Land

An Equal Opportunity Provider and Employer

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USDA Non-Discrimination Statement

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) prohibits discrimination in all its programs and activities on the basis of race, color, national origin, age, disability, and where applicable, sex, marital status, familial status, parental status, religion, sexual orientation, genetic information, political beliefs, reprisal, or because all or a part of an individual's income is derived from any public assistance program. (Not all prohibited bases apply to all programs.) Persons with disabilities who require alternative means for communication of program information (Braille, large print, audiotape, etc.) should contact USDA's TARGET Center at (202) 720-2600 (voice and TDD). To file a complaint of discrimination write to USDA, Director, Office of Civil Rights, 1400 Independence Avenue, S.W., Washington, D.C. 20250-9410 or call (800) 795-3272 (voice) or (202) 720-6382 (TDD).

USDA is an Equal Opportunity Provider and Employer

About Your Employer

United States Department of Agriculture



The U. S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) serves all Americans daily. The Department's mission is to improve and maintain farm income, to assure

consumers safe and adequate food supplies at reasonable prices, and to develop and expand markets for projects abroad. It works to enhance the environment and to maintain production capacity by helping landowners protect the soil, water, forests, and other natural resources. Rural development, credit, and conservation programs are key resources for carrying out National growth policies. Other research covers such areas as animal disease and pest control, crop production, and the marketing and use of agricultural products.

In the Department's early years, the vast majority of Americans lived on farms, and farmers produced only enough food to supply themselves and few other people. Today, although less than two percent of the population resides on farmland, farm workers produce enough for this country – as well as for a growing export market. Agriculture is, in fact, this Nation's largest industry and its largest employer – approximately 21 million people work in some phase of agriculture – from growing food and fiber to selling it in the supermarket.

It is USDA's mission to enhance the quality of life for the American people by supporting production of agriculture:

- ensuring a safe, affordable, nutritious, and accessible food supply
- caring for agricultural, forest, and range lands
- supporting sound development of rural communities
- providing economic opportunities for farm and rural residents
- expanding global markets for agricultural and forest products and services
- and working to reduce hunger in America and throughout the world.

Natural Resources Conservation Service



The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is a technical agency of the United

States Department of Agriculture (USDA). NRCS combines the authorities formerly assigned to the Soil Conservation Service (SCS) and additional programs that provide financial assistance for natural resource conservation. SCS was established in 1935 to carry out a continuing program of soil and water conservation in partnership with local conservation districts. In 1994, the Secretary of Agriculture reorganized SCS with a new name and broader responsibilities, using the authority provided in the Federal Crop Insurance Reform and Department of Agriculture Reorganization Act of 1994.

Most of the nearly 12,000 NRCS employees work in nearly 2,900 field offices across the Nation, providing services directly to our customers. Field office employees provide the technical expertise that enables land managers to balance their economic goals with the needs of the natural environment, creating sustainable systems that not only produce abundant crops and livestock, but also a quality environment. Field office staff work side-by-side with employees of the local conservation district and State conservation agency.

OUR VISION: Productive Lands-Healthy Environment—the landscape that Americans want provides both a productive agricultural sector and a high quality environment. Productive use of privately owned crop, range, pastures and forest land is essential to the Nation's security and the health and well-being of its citizens. These lands form the foundation of a substantial and vibrant agricultural economy that provides food, fiber, forest products, and energy for the Nation. They also provide environmental benefits that people need—clean and abundant water, clean air and healthy ecosystems.

OUR MISSION: Helping People Help the Land— We provide products and services that enable people to be good stewards of the Nation's soil, water, and related natural resources on private land. As a result of our assistance, land managers and communities take a comprehensive approach to the use and protection of natural resources in rural, suburban, urban and developing areas. Using a

comprehensive approach, the people we help are able to help the land function as a living, sustainable system that provides a high standard of living and quality of life today and for future generations.

The People of NRCS

The NRCS workforce nationwide is a diverse and highly skilled group of conservationists, biologists, engineers, and agronomists focused on the same vision: Productive lands – Healthy Environment. Among the most common careers in NRCS are the following:

- **Soil Conservationists** spend much of their time in the field working with their farmers, ranchers, and other land users. Soil Conservationists offer conservation planning and technical help to everyone from family farmers to local government officials.
- **Soil Scientists** map and classify soils, identify problems such as wetness and erosion, and use aerial photographs to map soils and write soil descriptions and prepare other information about soils.
- **Biologists** work in the field with private landowners and other agencies. They provide technical support on fish and wildlife habitat development or restoration.
- **Engineers** in NRCS use specialized skills in erosion control, water management, structural design, construction, hydraulics, soil mechanics, and environmental protection, along with general engineering skills. Job assignments may include establishing stream-bank and erosion control measures and water supply systems; designing waste management systems and concrete and earthen dams; and applying bioengineering principles to solve a host of natural resource problems. Engineers also become involved in helping communities recover from natural disasters.
- **Agronomists** provide guidance on nutrient and pesticide management planning and practices.
- Other Careers in NRCS include Accounting, Agricultural Economics, Business Administration, Cartography, Communications, Contracting, Forestry, Geology, Human Resources, Hydrology, Landscape Architecture, Plant Sciences, Rangeland Management, Rural

Sociology, Watershed Management, Wetland Science, and Wildlife Biology.

Personnel and Administrative Policies

It will be beneficial for you to read and understand the regulations and policies that apply to your work and conduct as an employee. Each agency within the Department publishes regulations, policies, and procedures to supplement those provided by USDA or to provide information on matters that pertain only to the Agency. Information pertinent to employees is contained in directives, manuals, circulars, and instructions. The General Manual website is <http://directives.sc.egov.usda.gov>.

Ethics and Personal Conduct

As a federal employee you are held to standards of ethical behavior representative of a public servant. These ethical standards are outlined in Executive Order 12674, as modified by Executive Order 12731. There are two core concepts underlying the ethical standards of these Executive Orders: employees shall not use public office for private gain; and employees shall act impartially and not give preferential treatment to any private organization or individual. In addition, employees must avoid any action that would create the appearance that they are violating the law or ethical standards.

You will receive copies of:

- Self-Certification of Accomplished Ethics Orientation Briefing
- The Standards of Ethical Conduct For Employees of the Executive Branch (Including the Principals of Ethical Conduct, section 2635.101—2635.107)
- Supplemental Standards of Ethical Conduct for Employees of the Department of Agriculture
- Employee Responsibilities and Conduct OHRM Personnel Bulletin 735-1

Your supervisor will allow you official time to review the ethics regulations. If you have any questions about which of the rules applies to you in your current position, or any other questions, please discuss them with your supervisor and/or the Florida State Administrative Officer. The USDA Ethics website is <http://www.usda-ethics.net/>.

Political Activity

Under the Hatch Act, Federal employees face restrictions on their ability to participate in political activities. Generally speaking, Federal employees **may**:

- be candidates for public office in nonpartisan elections;
- register and vote as they choose;
- assist in voter registration drives;
- express opinions about candidates and issues;
- contribute money to political organizations;
- attend political fundraising functions;
- attend and be active at political rallies and meetings;
- join and be an active member of a political party or club;
- sign nominating petitions;
- campaign for or against referendum questions, constitutional amendments, or municipal ordinances;
- campaign for or against candidates in partisan elections;
- make campaign speeches for candidates in partisan elections;
- distribute campaign literature in partisan elections; and
- hold office in political clubs or parties.

They **may not**:

- use official authority or influence to interfere with an election or legislation;
- solicit or discourage political activity of anyone with business before their agency;
- solicit or receive political contributions (may be done in certain limited situations by federal labor or other employee organizations);
- be candidates for public office in partisan elections;
- engage in political activity while on duty, in a government office, wearing an official uniform or using a government vehicle; or
- wear political buttons on duty.

Government Property and Supplies

Employees have a duty to protect and conserve Government property and should not use Government property for other than authorized purposes. Government property includes items such as office supplies, telephone and other telecommunications equipment and services, Government mail, automated data processing capabilities, printing and reproduction facilities, Government records, and Government vehicles.

The government will supply you with the tools necessary to do your job. An important thing to remember is that the government provides the tools you need based on your minimum needs. When requesting something, you should describe your minimum needs, provide a written justification, and if requesting more than the minimum standard, a detailed justification as to why or what about the particular item is necessary to accomplish your duties. We are public employees, and the taxpayers do notice us. That may mean that you don't have mahogany furniture, a designer leather brief case, or a Rolls Royce to go meet with your clients. However, this does not preclude you from purchasing these at your own expense and using them. The government does not pay for items of personal preference or convenience.

Computers and Telecommunications

USDA policy provides for limited personal use of Government computer and telecommunications equipment on an occasional basis, provided that the use involves minimal expense to the Government and does not interfere with official business. Occasional personal use of computer /telecommunications resources shall take place during the employee's personal time, not during business hours. Use of the Federal telephone system for personal long-distance calls is not allowed.

While the occasional use of telecommunications resources in moderation is acceptable, uses not consistent with the USDA policy are strictly prohibited. Employees are expected to conduct themselves professionally in the workplace and to refrain from using telecommunications equipment for activities that are inappropriate or offensive to co-workers or the public, such as sexually explicit materials or remarks that

ridicule others on the basis of race, creed, religion, color, sex, handicap, national origin, or sexual orientation. Questions concerning appropriate use of Government property, including telecommunications equipment, should be addressed to your supervisor. We must make every effort to maintain good customer service. Listed below are several tips for a successful telephone conversation:

- Make a series of calls during a given time period, if possible. It is easier and more time efficient.
- Caring is one of the nicest traits to develop.
- Learn to ignore people's indifferences. People will provoke you only if you let them.
- Turn negative stress into a positive force by practicing self-control and maintaining high self-esteem.
- Use self-discipline to maintain an ongoing dialogue; even in difficult situations.
- At some point in your conversation, give everyone you talk to positive feedback.
- Make a brief apology if there is a problem, and do it with a smile. Callers can always hear it.
- Tune out distractions and concentrate on what is being said in the conversation.
- Let the other person talk without interrupting him/her.
- Improve listening by taking accurate notes.
- Ask questions so that you keep in tune with what the caller is thinking; as well as saying.
- Speak the caller's language so everyone can relax.
- **Always remember you are a representative of NRCS.**

Office Mail

NRCS correspondence, publications and other items are mailed to recipients using official postage. These must conform to postal regulations and to Agency mailing procedures.

Use of Government letterhead and postage-paid privileges for personal purposes is not allowed. Also, note that it is a violation of Federal laws and regulations to use postage-paid Government envelopes to file job applications.

Unless it is an emergency, do not have personal mail or packages sent to your office.

Your Appointment

You have been appointed to your position with the Federal government through one of several types of appointments: career-conditional, career, time-limited (temporary or term), or excepted. The type of appointment you hold determines your eligibility for reinstatement into the federal service if you should decide to leave.

A **career-conditional appointment** is a permanent appointment that leads to career tenure after completion of three years of continuous service. Career-conditional employees are eligible for promotions and within-grade increases (WGs) and benefits. Under career-conditional appointments, you must complete a one year probationary period. Generally, career-conditional employees may not be promoted, reassigned, or transferred until three months after their initial appointment.

Employees who do not have veterans' preference and who leave their government jobs while under career-conditional appointments have reinstatement eligibility for three years from their date of separation. Therefore, without competing with other candidates, they may be re-employed in a position for which they qualify at the same grade or with no more promotional potential up to that of a position the employee previously held on a permanent basis under career-conditional appointment, even though the employee never reached the full performance level of the career ladder.

Employees who have veterans' preference and serve any period of time under their career-conditional appointment have reinstatement eligibility for life.

Employees who have completed three years without a break in service under career-conditional appointments acquire career tenure and are converted to career appointments. If they leave the federal service as career employees, they have reinstatement eligibility for life.

Temporary appointments are used to fill short-term employment needs of an organization. Temporary appointments are usually made for periods not to exceed one

year or less but may be extended for one more year. Temporary appointments may be terminated at any time upon written notice. General Service (GS) temporary employees are not eligible for promotions or within-grade increases. Wage Grade (WG) temporary employees are eligible for within-grade increases. Service under a temporary appointment does not confer eligibility for reinstatement.

Term appointments are normally used to fill temporary employment needs for a specific project. Term appointments are at first made for a period of one year and may be extended up to four years. The appointment may be terminated at any time upon written notice during the first year. Service under a term appointment does not confer eligibility for reinstatement.

Excepted appointments are used to fill positions that are exempt by law from the competitive system. Examples of employees under excepted appointments are Students Temporary Employment Program (STEP), Student Career Experience Program (SCEP), people with qualifying disabilities, and positions filled by veterans under the Veterans Readjustment Authority (VRA). Excepted appointments can be either permanent or temporary. Excepted employees under permanent appointments must complete a one year trial period.

You will receive a copy of Form SF-50-B, "Notification of Personnel Action". The Nature of Action and Tenure blocks on this form will indicate the type of appointment you have. Your particular type of appointment will determine your eligibility for Federal benefits.

Probationary Period/Trial Period

Upon your initial appointment you may be required to serve a probationary or trial period during your first year of service. This period allows you an opportunity to demonstrate successful job performance. During this period your supervisor will assess your conduct and performance and recommend your retention or removal.

An employee who does not meet acceptable standards of conduct and/or performance may be removed during the probationary or trial period. If you are separated during the

probationary or trial period for unsatisfactory conduct or performance, you do not have the right to appeal the decision; however, if you believe the separation action is discriminatory, you have the right to file a complaint through the EEO Complaint System.

Work Schedules

The standard tour of duty for a full-time employee is a 40-hour basic workweek consisting of five days of eight hours each day, Monday through Friday. Core hours are hours designated during which all employees must be at work. The core hours in NRCS are 9:00 a.m. – 3:00 p.m.

NRCS participates in a **Flexi-tour** and **Compressed** work schedules. The "Flexitour" offers an employee a flexible starting time of up to 30 minutes. When an employee varies their starting time up to 30 minutes after their designated starting time, the employee must make up this time at the end of the day or take approved leave. Employees are responsible for choosing a biweekly schedule within the flexible work schedule, 6:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. and submitting it in writing to the supervisor for approval. Your supervisor must approve your work schedule. Employees must complete their scheduled number of hours by 6:00 p.m. Employees must be present during the core hours (unless otherwise approved) or must be approved for leave during the portion of the core hours they are absent. For more information on alternate work schedules, refer to the General Manual. Check with your supervisor to see if these alternate work schedules apply to your office. You must complete a tour of duty form with your first appointment and each time you wish to make a long term change to your work schedule.

Part time employees must have a set schedule and must work those set hours or use annual or sick leave. Holiday pay is received only if the holiday falls on a day that you are regularly scheduled to work. If you cannot keep a set schedule you and your supervisor should consider an intermittent work schedule.

Intermittent employees do not have a pre-scheduled tour of duty and are not eligible to receive sick or annual leave.

Your Position

Position Classification

Under the GS pay system, jobs are categorized by occupational groups, series, classes, and grades. This system ensures that positions that are similar require comparable qualifications, and that employees who are doing substantially equal work receive equal pay.

The system is designed to provide a systematic grouping of positions by kind of work, level of difficulty and responsibility, and required qualifications of the position. The classification system is based on a set of written standards and guides, which are used by trained specialists to evaluate and classify positions. Classification Standards are issued by the Office of Personnel Management for use throughout the Government and are available at

<http://www.opm.gov/fedclass/index.asp>.

It is the position that is classified, not the employee in the position. Consequently, employee performance is not considered in the classification process. Similarly, the volume of work performed, employee's length of service, or superior qualifications are also not considered in classifying a position.

Position Description

Your supervisor will provide you with a description of your job. A position description is the official record of your major duties and responsibilities and the supervisory relationship of your position.

The duties and responsibilities that have been assigned to you will determine your title, the kind of position you occupy, the level or grade, series, and also the base pay that you will receive for performing the work. If significant changes take place in your job, your supervisor should take immediate steps to see that a new position description is prepared and submitted for classification review and must make certain that it represents the current duties and responsibilities that are assigned to you.

You and your supervisor have joint responsibility for reviewing your position description for accuracy and adequacy.

Performance Standards

You will have a performance work plan: a written document, developed by your supervisor, that identifies critical elements of your position and the standards by which you will be evaluated. A *critical element* is a work assignment or responsibility of such importance that unacceptable performance on the element would result in a determination that the employee's overall performance is at the unacceptable level, possibly leading to demotion or removal. Non-critical duties are not included in performance plans.

You and your supervisor need to share a common understanding of the supervisor's expectations for your performance, so good communication is very important. In addition, you should discuss the goals of the office and state, and the extent and nature of your involvement and contribution to meeting office goals for the upcoming year.

Your Career

Training

NRCS encourages all employees to participate in training opportunities. There are some annual training requirements for all employees such as cyber-security, the Constitution, Ethics, and Sexual Harassment. All new employees should take the web-based "Introduction to NRCS." You and your supervisor will discuss your training needs and develop an individual development plan.

The National Educational Development Center (NEDC) is the focal point for training in NRCS. The Center maintains a staff who work to provide timely, sequential, competency-based training; fundamental to our business of conservation. A catalog of available NEDC courses is available at <http://www.aglearn.usda.gov>. All NEDC courses and external training requests are made through the AgLearn system.

NRCS Mentoring Program

The NRCS Mentoring program is designed to provide assistance and guidance to new employees, student trainees, and current employees as they explore options and plan career growth strategies at NRCS.

The mentoring process links an experienced person (mentor) with a less experienced person (protégé), to foster the career development and professional growth of the protégé. The mentoring process requires that the mentor and protégé work together, often 1 to 3 years, to reach specific goals and to provide each other with sufficient feedback to ensure that these goals are reached. Participating in a mentoring program requires commitment and hard work.

Mentoring should be used in conjunction with training, details, special assignments, cross training, and other learning opportunities. Mentoring can take place within the State or across State lines.

Mentor - The mentor is the experienced professional who fosters the career development and professional growth of the protégé, who is not in a supervisory capacity to the protégé.

Protégé - The protégé is the individual whose career development and professional growth is fostered by the mentor.

All current employees may request a mentor at any time and become a protégé. Mentors may be selected from a pool of volunteers or at the request of the protégé. Contact Human Resources for more information.

Promotions and Transfers

Agencies may promote or reassign career or career-conditional employees under a variety of circumstances. They also may make time-limited promotions of up to five years to fill temporary positions, accomplish project work, fill positions temporarily pending reorganization, or to meet other temporary needs.

Generally, General Schedule employees who are promoted to a higher grade must receive a pay increase of at least two steps of the former grade.

A career or career-conditional employee of one agency may transfer, without a break in service, to a competitive service position in another agency without competing in a civil service examination open to the public but through a merit promotion announcement that is open to status candidates. An employee may transfer to a position at the same, higher, or lower grade level. It is to your benefit to always apply to both the merit and civil service examination announcements for the same position.

Merit Promotion

When a vacancy occurs within NRCS, the selecting official may fill the position through the Merit Promotion Program or other means within Office of Personnel Management (OPM) and NRCS regulations. Under our Merit Promotion Program, all NRCS vacancy announcements are published on the OPM website at <http://www.usajobs.opm.gov>. Also check jobs posted at <https://my.nrcs.usda.gov>.

Vacancy announcements give the job title, series, and grade; describe the duties; outline the qualification requirements; state other knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) that are required for the job; and give application procedures. Candidates who have been found to be "basically qualified" by a personnel specialist may then be evaluated by one or more subject matter experts who have knowledge and experience in that field. Candidates who are determined to be the best qualified are then referred to the selecting official for consideration. Qualification requirements for federal positions are described in the OPM Operating Manual, Qualification Standards for General Schedule Positions. You may review these standards by visiting the OPM web site at <http://www.opm.gov/qualifications/index.asp>.

Awards

Agencies have various award systems for their employees as recognition for ongoing good performance, suggestions, and inventions or for special contributions to the agency's mission.

Special Act or Service Awards are given for performance that exceeds job requirements as a one-time occurrence.

Employees also may be eligible for **quality step increases** of one step, based on superior performance.

Non-monetary awards such as **Length of Service Awards**, certificates, and similar forms of recognition can also be granted.

A **Time Off Award** can be granted for up to 40 hours per year and must be used within one year of receipt.

Pay and Leave

The GS Pay System

The general schedule (GS) pay system is divided into 15 grades, each of which has ten steps. Entry-level hiring is normally made into the 1st step of the grade, although there are rare exceptions to this rule. The grade level of an initial hire depends largely on the occupation, as does the career progression up through the grades.

Pay is locality based. For GS employees, there are 30 or more metropolitan locality pay areas and a catchall “rest of the U.S.” (RUS) pay rate for everywhere else within the contiguous 48 states. Raises are set by local labor market conditions, subject to the availability of funds appropriated by Congress. The pay charts are available at <http://www.opm.gov/oca/12tables/index.asp>. In Florida employees fall under either the RUS, or Miami-Ft. Lauderdale-Miami Beach (Broward Co., Miami-Dade Co., Monroe Co. or Palm Beach Co.) locality pay areas.

Some GS employees receive a special pay rate because of the shortage of qualified applicants available to fill jobs. Engineers may receive these special pay rates instead of the locality or RUS pay rates discussed above. At some grades the locality based pay may be higher and employees will always receive the higher of the two pay charts for their position.

Your Pay

NRCS employees are paid biweekly. The annual pay rates are based on 26 pay periods of 80 hours each, a total of 2,087 hours for the year. Your salary check will be deposited directly to your account at your financial institution through an electronic funds transfer (EFT). This will take place every two weeks on designated paydays. Our official payday is the second Thursday of the following pay period, although you’ll generally find the EFT payment is deposited in your bank account on the previous Monday.

Your appointment with NRCS was probably effective at the beginning of a pay period. Your first timesheet will not be submitted until the end of that two-week pay period, and it takes the National Finance Center and the Treasury Department a few days to compute your pay and execute the EFT to your bank account. So you will receive your first paycheck approximately three weeks after you begin work. From that point forward, your salary will be deposited every two weeks.

Overtime /FLSA

The federal government complies with the overtime provisions of both the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) and the Federal Employees Pay and Compensation Act. Eligibility for overtime compensation varies, depending in large part on whether or not you are “exempt” from FLSA provisions. Block 35 on your SF-50-B, Notification of Personnel Action, indicates if your position is exempt. Questions about eligibility for overtime may be discussed with your supervisor or the Human Resources Office. Note that all overtime should be approved in advance.

Within-Grade Increases (WGIs)

If eligible, you advance from one step of your grade to the next step by means of a within-grade increase (WGI). General Schedule employees are eligible for within-grade increases (provided that their performance is at an acceptable level) after completing the following waiting periods:

- 1 year for advancement to steps 2-4;
- 2 years for advancement to steps 5-7; and
- 3 years for advancement to steps 8-10.

In addition, employees who demonstrate outstanding performance of their full range of duties may receive a Quality Step Increase (QSI) of one step under the employee recognition program unless they are already at step 10.

Annual Leave

Annual leave may be used for whatever purposes you desire. Most people use it for vacations and personal business. Use of annual leave must be approved in advance by your supervisor. You must complete a leave request form if you wish to use three days or more of leave. The form can be found:

http://www.opm.gov/forms/pdf_fill/opm71.pdf.

You will accrue annual leave for each full pay period of employment unless you have been in a non-pay status for the entire pay period. You earn annual leave based on your number of years of Federal employment. Full-time employees earn annual leave at the following rates:

- 4 hours of annual leave per pay period if length of service is less than 3 years
- 6 hours of annual leave per pay period if length of service is more than 3 years, but less than 15
- 8 hours of annual leave per pay period if length of service is 15 years or more

Annual leave is accrued by part-time employees on a prorated basis. Employees with an intermittent work schedule are not eligible to earn annual or sick leave.

Temporary employees who are serving under appointments limited to 90 days or less are entitled to annual leave after being currently employed for a continuous period of 90 days under successive appointments without a break in service. After completing the 90-day period, the employee is entitled to be credited with the leave that would have accrued to him or her during that period.

Employees may carry no more than 30 days (240 hours) of unused annual leave from year to year. Balances over the 240 amount are known as “use or lose” hours and will be deducted at the end of the leave year. It is to your benefit to schedule leave throughout the year as you may not be able to use all of the leave by the cut-off date. You can donate the excess leave to a leave share recipient. Notices of approved

recipients are posted on the electronic bulletin board on the “My.NRCS” website. In rare cases an employee may carry a higher balance at the end of the leave year.

Notify the personnel office if you have prior service that has not been credited to your service computation date. This includes all federal service, military and Peace Corps time. This time is creditable for calculation of your service computation date for leave and may be creditable for retirement purposes as well.

Sick Leave

Sick leave may be used when you: receive medical, dental, or optical examination or treatment; are incapacitated by physical or mental illness, injury, pregnancy, or childbirth; would, because of exposure to a communicable disease, jeopardize the health of others by your presence on the job; or must be absent from work for adoption-related activities.

You may also use a limited amount of sick leave to provide care for a family member as the result of physical or mental illness, injury, pregnancy, childbirth, or medical, dental, or optical examination or treatment; or make arrangements necessitated by the death of a family member or attend the funeral of a family member. For more information about Family Leave benefits, contact the Human Resources Office, or see <http://www.opm.gov/oca/leave/index.asp>.

For full-time employees, the sick leave accrual rate is 13 days a year; for part-time employees, it’s one hour for each 20 hours in pay status. There is no limit on how many sick leave hours you can carry forward from year to year.

Court Leave

Court leave is the authorized absence of an employee from work, without charge to leave or loss of pay, for jury duty or for attending judicial proceedings in a non-official capacity as a witness on behalf of either party, as long as one of the parties is a Federal, State, or local government.

Proof of court leave must be in the form of a jury or witness duty certificate signed by an official of the court. You must

furnish this certificate to your supervisor in advance for court leave approval, and then to the timekeeper to be kept with the time and attendance report for the appropriate pay period.

All full-time and part-time, leave-earning employees are eligible if their services are required during their regularly scheduled tours of duty. For example, if a part-time employee is not scheduled to work on Mondays and he or she is summoned for jury duty that day, the employee is not entitled to court leave for that day. Employees must report for duty when excused from jury duty for a day or substantial portion of a day.

If an employee is on annual leave when called for jury service, court leave should be substituted. An employee on leave without pay, although otherwise eligible, may not be granted court leave when called to jury duty.

Usually, state and local courts will compensate employees for jury or witness duty. You should accept these fees and remit them to the Financial Management Section in the State Office. You may retain fees identified as reimbursement of expenses for jury services, such as travel, mileage, lodging, per diem and other out of pocket expenses.

Witness Service

Official capacity - An employee called as a court witness to testify in an official capacity, no matter on whose behalf, is in an official duty status rather than on court leave. The employee must be paid government travel expenses as appropriate.

Nonofficial capacity - An employee summoned as a witness to testify in a nonofficial capacity on behalf of either party, as long as one of the parties is Federal, State, or local government, is entitled to court leave during the time absent as a witness.

If the witness service is on a nonofficial capacity on behalf of a private party and the government is not one of the parties, the employee's absence must be charged to annual leave.

If you receive a summons or subpoena as a witness, you should notify your supervisor. The supervisor will provide a copy of the subpoena to the Human Resources Office.

When court leave is granted, employees are allowed to keep fees paid for reimbursement of expenses but are not allowed to keep fees paid for jury/witness services.

Credit Hours

Credit hours are those hours worked in excess of the basic work requirement, at an eligible employee's election, with supervisory approval, to complete pending workload items.

Employees may only earn up to a maximum of two credit hours in a workday. Employees on a traditional work schedule, fixed compressed work schedule (5-4/9 or 4-10) and members of the Senior Executive Service may not accumulate credit hours. Full-time employees may not carry more than 24 credit hours from one pay period to another. Credit hours in excess of 24 hours at the end of a pay period are lost.

Part-time employees may accumulate credit hours on a pro rata basis upon completion of their regularly scheduled hours of duty for the day. Employees may not carry more than $\frac{1}{4}$ of the hours equal to his or her biweekly work requirement from one pay period to another. For example, a part-time employee scheduled to work 64 hours per pay period could carry a maximum of 16 hours ($\frac{1}{4} \times 64 = 16$).

Credit hours may be earned in increments of 15 minutes.

- On scheduled workdays between the hours of 6:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m.
- Before 6:00 a.m. and after 6:00 p.m. to voluntarily attend night meetings, work on projects.

The first-line supervisor has the authority to approve or deny an employee's request to take credit hours based on the same criteria as annual leave, i.e., workload and work requirements. Approval or denial of leave (and the basis if denied) must be communicated to the employee in a timely manner.

Compensatory Time Off

Compensatory time off must be used before the employee may be granted annual leave provided it will not result in the employee forfeiting accrued annual leave. Once an employee has taken compensatory time, he or she may not request overtime pay for the work. Compensatory time off must be used by the end of the leave year following the leave year in which it was earned. An employee requesting to use compensatory time in excess of three consecutive workdays must obtain advance authorization on an OPM 71, Request for Leave or Approved Absence.

Military Leave

Military leave is absence with full pay for certain types of active duty, active duty training, and inactive duty training. Inactive duty training is authorized training performed by members of a Reserve component not on active duty and performed in connection with the prescribed activities of the Reserve component. It consists of regularly scheduled unit training periods, additional training periods, and equivalent training.

Full-time career employees, part-time career employees who work at least 16 hours but no more than 32 hours per week, temporary indefinite, Temporary Appointment Pending Establishment of Register (TAPER), and employees who have unlimited excepted appointments under Schedule A or C authority, are eligible for military leave with pay.

An employee receives 120 hours (15 calendar days) of military leave during each fiscal year and may carry over a maximum of 120 hours (15 calendar days) of military leave from prior years. The full 120 hours is credited to the employee the first pay period of each fiscal year. The minimum charge to military leave is one hour.

Military leave is granted on a prorated basis to part-time employees. The amount of military leave is determined by dividing 40 into the employee's weekly tour of duty, multiplying by 15 days, and rounding down to the lower number of whole days.

Military leave may be used during one or more periods of

military duty during the fiscal year. The employee may also take the full 120 hours (15 days) of military leave immediately at the beginning of a fiscal year, even if up to a maximum of 240 hours (30 days) had been taken during the prior year and even if the military duty is continuous. An employee does not need to return from military duty to a civilian position before additional military leave, earned during a new fiscal year, may be used.

Military leave should be credited to a full-time employee on the basis on an eight hour workday. The minimum charge to leave is one hour. An employee may be charged military leave only for hours that the employee would otherwise have worked and received pay.

Employees who request military leave for inactive duty training will now be charged only the amount of military leave necessary to cover the period of training and necessary travel. Members of the Reserves and/or National Guard will no longer be charged military leave for weekends and holidays that occur within the period of military service.

Military leave must be supported by a copy of the employee's military orders directing him or her to report for active duty or training.

Reservists are entitled up to an additional 176 hours (22 workdays) of leave each calendar year to assist civil authorities in emergencies. The Reservist must be activated by order of the President or State Governor to provide military aid to enforce the law, or in the protection or saving of life and property, or the prevention of injury. The provision is intended for military Reservists who are called to active duty to assist law enforcement officials with riots or other forms of interference with State and Federal law, and to help when natural disasters occur such as floods, tornadoes, etc.

Federal employees using emergency military leave must refund, through their servicing Human Resources Office, any monies received for emergency military leave, with the exception of monies paid for travel, transportation, and per diem allowances. No refund is necessary if the employee uses annual leave.

If the employee does not have sufficient military leave to cover the absence, the employee may use other leave, as appropriate. First-line supervisors may approve military or other leave upon an employee's submission of proper documentation.

Only Reserve and National Guard Technicians are entitled to 44 workdays of military leave for duties overseas under certain conditions.

Excused Absence

Excused absence, sometimes referred to as administrative leave, is an absence from duty, administratively authorized, without loss of pay and without charge to leave. Granting excused absences are authorized in limited circumstances for the benefit of the Agency's mission or a government-wide or Agency-recognized and sanctioned purpose. Some types of excused absences may include, but are not limited to:

- **Time off for voting:** In locations where the polls are not open at least three hours before or after an employee's regular work hours, a limited amount of excused absence may be granted to permit the employee to report to work up to three hours after the polls open or leave work up to three hours before the polls close, whichever requires the lesser amount of time off. In addition, if an employee's voting location is beyond normal commuting distance from his/her duty station and absentee ballot voting is not permitted, the employee may be granted sufficient time off (not to exceed one day) in order to make the trip to the voting location to cast a ballot. If more than one day is needed, the employee may request annual leave or leave without pay for the additional period of absence. An employee's "regular work hours" are to be determined by reference to the time of day the employee normally arrives at and departs from work.
- **Military funerals:** Employees who are veterans may be excused for as much as four hours in a day to participate as pallbearers, members of firing squads, or honor guards in funeral ceremonies for members of the Armed Forces whose remains are returned from abroad for final interment in the United States. An employee is considered a veteran for receipt of an excused absence if he or she:
 - a. Is a veteran of any war;
 - b. Participated in a campaign or expedition for which a campaign badge has been authorized; or
 - c. Is a member of an honor guard or ceremonial group of a veteran's organization.
- **Funeral leave (Relative Killed in the Line of Duty):** Employees may be excused for as much as three workdays to make arrangements or to attend the funeral or memorial service for an immediate relative who dies as a result of wounds, disease, or injury incurred while serving in a combat zone as a member of the Armed Forces. The three days need not be consecutive and may include travel time.
- **Blood donation:** An employee making a donation of blood, for which there will not be compensation, may be excused from work without charge to annual or sick leave for a period not to exceed four hours (not including the time needed for the donation) for the purpose of subsequent rest and recuperation. Supervisors may require medical evidence of blood donation as deemed necessary. Employees who receive compensation for blood donation during duty hours are required to take leave for the period of absence.
- **Bone-Marrow and organ donation:** Employees may be granted up to seven workdays in a calendar year to serve as bone-marrow donor. An employee also may use up to thirty workdays in a calendar year to serve as an organ donor. Annual and sick leave may be granted in conjunction with the excused absence. Employees must notify their immediate supervisor, as soon as possible, after the donor procedure has been scheduled. Employees must provide medical documentation that is certified by an attending physician, donor hospital, or medical center and includes:
 - a. Date of scheduled donor procedure;
 - b. Period required for post-operative recuperation; and
 - c. Post-operative certification that the procedure has been performed.
- **Qualification examinations:** Employees shall be given official leave to take job qualification examinations or to obtain professional licenses if the examination:
 - a. Is required for the position the employee currently occupies;
 - b. Is for a position to which the Agency or Department has recommended the employee be transferred, promoted, or reassigned; and
 - c. Is required for a professional license or certification (CPA certification, engineer's license, etc.), which is considered advantageous to the Agency.

- **Preventative Health Services:** Employees with less than 80 hours of accrued sick leave may and should be granted up to four hours of excused absence each year to take advantage of screening and prevention programs for themselves. The four hours of excused absence may be used a portion at a time over more than one day during a leave year. The days on which excused absence is used do not have to be consecutive. Employees must still receive supervisory approval.
- **Before/After official travel:** An employee may be excused up to two hours without charge to leave before or after travel status if the time of departure from or arrival at the employee's assigned duty station makes reporting to the office impractical. This excused absence may be used in conjunction with two hours of leave.
- **Volunteer activities:** An employee may be granted excused absences for short periods of time to participate in volunteer activities that are:
 - a. Directly related to the Agency's mission;
 - b. Officially sponsored or sanctioned by the Agency, e.g., Toys for Tots, Gifts for Senior Citizens, Partnership in Education, (Federal) Executive Board projects; or
 - c. Enhancing to the professional development and/or skills of the employee in his or her current position.

Office Closures

In some situations, conditions will be of sufficient magnitude to cause hazardous conditions which could be dangerous to the safety of employees at a specific office. The condition must be general rather than personal in scope of impact and sufficient to prevent most employees from reaching work safely. Office closing or delayed opening will be communicated to employees through an established telephone notification system.

In the hazardous conditions case, the following policy will apply in Florida: If the office opening is delayed, it should be delayed to a certain time, e.g. 10:00 a.m., rather than a "2-hour delay." All employees who report to work will be granted administrative leave from the beginning of their regularly scheduled tour of duty until the determined opening time. Excess time should be charged to employee's leave.

Employees who do not work at all on a delayed start day will be charged leave for the entire day.

Employees who choose not to report to work due to the hazardous weather conditions will be charged annual leave for the entire workday. This is consistent with NRCS policy found in General Manual 360, Part 415.2N(3)-(8), May 2003.

If an early dismissal decision is made, the early dismissal will be at a certain time, e.g. 3:00 p.m. All employees on duty at the scheduled dismissal time should leave the office and will be granted administrative leave until the end of their regularly scheduled tour of duty.

When an early dismissal decision is made, employees may be approved leave, as requested, between the notice of dismissal and the actual dismissal. They are not to be charged leave from the time of actual dismissal to the end of the workday. However, if the employee chooses to leave the office prior to the notice of the dismissal they will be charged the entire time as leave.

If the employee is on scheduled leave and the office is closed the entire day for hazardous conditions; the employee will receive administrative leave. For example, an employee on vacation, is entitled to administrative leave for the closed office day.

In order to accommodate those who have concerns about winter driving conditions when the office is functioning on a regular schedule, a flexible leave policy is established which will allow individuals to adjust their arrival or departure time. This type of leave is charged to annual leave. Employees should continue to notify their supervisors if they plan to arrive beyond 30 minutes of their scheduled work arrival time.

If an employee chooses to work, he or she cannot be granted additional time off in lieu of the hazardous weather time.

Telecommuting employees are not excused from working their regular duty hours on a "closing day". See General Manual 360-429.26 for detailed information on telecommuting and Group Dismissal.

If an employee's area of residence is affected, the employee may be excused without charge to leave, with approval from the State Conservationist, if all of the following apply:

- Weather conditions in the area of an employee's residence are publicly declared extremely hazardous by an appropriate State or local authority and driving has been limited;
- The employee is unable to report to duty and was not on scheduled leave.

Voluntary Emergency Services

Time off without loss of pay or charge to other leave may be given to employees who serve as volunteer firemen or perform other rescue or protective work during emergency situations. Conditions for granting leave for these emergencies are:

- Must be directly related to the Agency's mission,
- Employee must be a member of a voluntary rescue or protection organization, or be officially requested to participate in an emergency situation,
- Employee must actually participate in an emergency situation,
- Work in the office must not be adversely impacted on a regular basis.

The amount of leave granted shall not exceed the duration of the emergency. The employee must provide the supervisor documentation reflecting his or her membership on any voluntary rescue or protective organization, prior to being allowed to use this leave. The first-line supervisor has the authority to limit or prohibit the use of leave if the employee's absence is adversely impacting the operation of the office. The supervisor should carefully review and approve or disapprove each request.

An employee must request excused absences in advance and in writing, when possible.

Participation in Non-Federal Organizations

An employee may be excused from work to participate in non-Federal organizations in cases when the employee's leadership role in an organization reflects well on the Department as a resource of professional expertise and talent.

Administrative leave in excess of one hour must be approved by the Deputy Chief for Management or the employee's Regional Conservationist. The Regional Conservationist may not re-delegate this authority. The Regional Conservationist should consult with the Deputy Chief for Management prior to approving more than 24 hours of administrative leave per leave year for any employee except in instances in which the employee is in a scientific discipline for which a leadership role in such professional organizations is a prerequisite to one's professional advancement.

Change of Official Duty Station

A non-temporary employee who is making a change of official duty station in the interest of the Federal Government which involves relocation of the family residence may be granted up to 80 hours of excused absence for pre-moving and post-moving arrangements, such as stopping and starting utility services, transferring schools for children, locating living quarters at the new duty location including travel time covered in GSA Federal Travel Regulations. The on-the-road travel time involved in the final one-way move is not chargeable against the 80 hours limitation nor is time for packing since packing is covered in the commuted rate allowance.

Adjustment of Work Schedules for Religious Observances

Employees may work compensatory overtime for the purpose of taking time off without charge to leave when personal religious beliefs require that they abstain from work during certain periods of the workday or workweek. There are no restrictions on the "kind" of religious holiday or observance that an employee may observe. There is no relationship between overtime worked for this purpose and regular overtime worked under Code of Federal Regulations, Title 5 and the Fair Labor Standards Act.

Full-time and part-time employees are eligible to elect to work compensatory overtime or to take compensatory time off to meet their religious obligations. Compensatory overtime for this purpose may be earned the pay period before the employee expects to take off, or if the

compensatory time is advanced, it should be repaid within the next two pay periods after its use, or no later than the end of the leave year. An employee must state, in writing, the date and time being requested to take off for religious observance, along with a proposal on when compensatory time will be earned. First-line supervisors may approve employee requests to work or take compensatory time off for religious observances. Supervisors are encouraged to accommodate such requests.

Voluntary Leave Transfer Program

The Voluntary Leave Transfer Program (VLTP) or Leave Share allows Federal employees to voluntarily donate earned annual leave to another Federal employee with a medical emergency, who has exhausted his or her own leave. All individuals involved in the VLTP are responsible for protecting the confidentiality /privacy of the participants of the program. Employees are eligible to participate in the VLTP on a full-time basis as well as while working part time. Notices of approved leave share recipients are posted on the My.NRCS website at <https://my.nrcs.usda.gov/default.aspx>.

Lunch

Employees are responsible for choosing a lunch period of 30 minutes to a maximum of one hour (employees do not get paid for their lunch period) within the established lunch band, (11:00 a.m. – 2:00 p.m.). With supervisory approval, employees on the flexitour schedule may expand their lunch period within the established lunch band and make up the time at the end of the day without charge to leave. Employees are to observe designated duty hours and be punctual in reporting for work and returning from lunch. An employee who works more than six hours in a day MUST take a lunch-time period.

Holidays

There are ten legal holidays for Federal employees: New Year's Day, M. L. King, Jr. Birthday, President's Day, Memorial Day, Independence Day, Labor Day, Columbus Day, Veterans Day, Thanksgiving Day, and Christmas Day.

Benefits

Health Insurance

The Federal Employees Health Benefits (FEHB) program is designed to help protect you and eligible family members from the expenses of illness and accident. Unlike many private sector health benefit plans, it provides coverage without physical examination, places no restrictions on age or physical condition, offers a wide range of plans to choose from, and cannot be canceled by the plan in which you enroll. You must enroll by completing the SF-2809 form within 60 days of the beginning of your employment otherwise you will have to wait until the next open season or if you have a qualifying life event such as marriage or birth of a child. You may drop health coverage if you have a qualifying life event or during an open season, but remember, in order to carry health insurance into retirement you must be enrolled the five years prior to retirement including disability retirement.

You and the government share the cost of the FEHB program. On average, the government pays slightly more than 70 percent of the cost. You pay your share of the premium through a payroll deduction. You can use your FEHB benefits as soon as your coverage is effective. There are no waiting periods, required medical examinations, or restrictions because of age or physical condition.

There are two types of enrollment in each FEHB plan: self only, which provides benefits only to you; and self and family, providing benefits to you and all eligible family members. A self and family enrollment covers you, your spouse, your unmarried dependent children under age 26, and unmarried dependent child age 26 or over who are incapable of self-support because of a mental or physical disability that existed before age 26.

You can choose from among fee for service (FFS) plans, regardless of where you live, or plans offering a point of service (POS) product and health maintenance organizations (HMO) if you live (or sometimes if you work) within the area serviced by the plan.

Each November the government holds an “open season” in which you may change plans or change levels of coverage if you wish. Your change is effective the first full pay period of January.

Federal employees can use pre-tax dollars to pay health insurance premiums to the Federal Employees Health Benefits Program under the "Premium Conversion" program. Premium conversion uses Federal tax rules to let employees deduct their share of health insurance premiums from their taxable income, thereby reducing their taxes. You are automatically placed in this benefit unless you ask to not participate.

Coverage for Children over 26

When children reach age 26, they are eligible to enroll in Temporary Continuation of Coverage (TCC). Contact the Human Resources Office and inform them that your child is turning age 26. It is not their responsibility to notify you. They will give you information about enrolling your child for TCC. You have 60 days from the 26th birthday to notify the Human Resources Office that your child turned 26. Your child has 60 days from the later of the 26th birthday or the date of the TCC notice from the Human Resources Office to request enrollment for TCC. For more information about eligibility: <http://www.opm.gov/insure/health/eligibility/>.

Coverage for Temporary employees

Temporary employees are eligible to enroll at own cost under 5 U.S.C. 8906a when they have completed one year of current continuous employment, excluding any break in service of five days or less and must pay both the employee and the Government shares of the premium.

The one year requirement may be met at the end of a one year appointment in a single agency or it may be based on a series of shorter appointments served in one or more agencies, as long as there is not had a break in service of more than five days. If an employee changes to an intermittent tour of duty after enrollment begins, enrollment will continue as long as there is not a break in service of more than three calendar days.

Coverage for Student Employees

Temporary student employees, who generally serve on appointments limited to one year or less, and typically work part-time during the school year and full-time during summers must complete one year on the employment rolls, and will then pay the full premium cost. Students whose appointments are as Career Experience Program employees are eligible for health insurance immediately and pay only the employee premium.

Intermittent Employment

Intermittent employees who do not have a prearranged regular tour of duty are not eligible for coverage. Seasonal or occasional employment for one calendar year that amounted to less than six months of work does not meet the one year of current continuous employment requirement.

Exceptions

A temporary employee is eligible for FEHB coverage immediately if an appointment follows, with a break in service of no more than three days, a position in which insured to a temporary appointment. In this case the employee pays only the employee premium.

Federal Employees Dental and Vision Insurance Program (FEDVIP)

This insurance offers competitive premiums and no pre-existing condition limitations. Premiums for enrolled employees are withheld from salary on a pre-tax basis. There is no government contribution to the premiums and all eligible employees pay the same premium regardless of work schedule. Employees must be eligible for the FEHB Program in order to be eligible to enroll in FEDVIP. It does not matter if they are actually enrolled in FEHB - eligibility is the key. Annuitants are eligible to enroll in FEDVIP no matter what their FEHB status is, but pre-tax premiums are not available to annuitants or survivor annuitants. The rules for family members' eligibility are the same as they are for the FEHB Program.

Employees can enroll during the annual open season, that is

concurrent with the FEHB open season, or after a qualifying life event that permits enrollment outside of open season. New employees will have 60 days to enroll.

Like health insurance, a FEDVIP coverage election continues each year, unless an employee makes a change during open season or as a result of a qualifying life event that permits a change outside of open season. Unlike other federal insurance programs, FEDVIP can only be canceled during open season.

There are no waiting periods for dental or vision services other than orthodontia which has a two year waiting period. The family member must be enrolled for 24 months prior to using this benefit. For information on plans and premium see http://www.opm.gov/insure/federal_employ/index.asp. Employees can enroll for this program at <https://www.benefeds.com/Portal/jsp/LoginPage.jsp>.

Health Savings Accounts

A High Deductible Health Plan (HDHP) with a Health Savings Account (HSA) or a Health Reimbursement Arrangement (HRA) provides traditional medical coverage and a tax free way to help you build savings for future medical expenses. The HDHP features higher annual deductibles (a minimum of \$1,100 for Self and \$2,200 for Self and Family coverage) than other traditional health plans. With the exception of preventive care, you must meet the annual deductible before the plan pays benefits.

When you enroll in an HDHP, the health plan determines if you are eligible for a Health Savings Account (HSA) or a Health Reimbursement Arrangement (HRA). If you are Medicare enrolled, you are not eligible for an HSA. Each month, the plan automatically credits a portion of the health plan premium into your HSA or HRA, based on your eligibility as of the first day of the month. You can pay your deductible with funds from your HSA or HRA.

A Limited Expense Health Care Flexible Savings Account (LEX HCFSAs) is an additional option available to employees who are enrolled in a Federal Employees Health Benefits (FEHB) Program high deductible health plan (HDHP) with a health savings account (HSA). Eligible expenses with the LEX HCFSAs are limited to dental and vision care services/products that

meet the IRS definition of medical care. See http://www.opm.gov/insure/federal_employ/index.asp for more information on Health Savings Accounts.

Flexible Spending Accounts - Health and Dependent Care

A Flexible Spending Account (FSA) is a tax-favored program offered by employers that allows you to pay for your eligible out-of-pocket health care and dependent care expenses with pre-tax dollars. By using pre-tax dollars to pay for eligible health care and dependent care expenses, an FSA gives you an immediate discount on these expenses that equals the taxes you would otherwise pay on that money.

In other words, with an FSA, you can both reduce your taxes and get more for your money by saving 20% to more than 40% on the dollars you would normally pay for out-of-pocket health care and dependent care expenses with after-tax (as opposed to untaxed) dollars.

FSAFEDS offers two types of FSAs:

- The **Health Care Flexible Spending Account (HCFSAs)** can be used to pay for qualified medical costs and health care expenses that are not paid by your Federal Employees Health Benefits (FEHB) plan or any other insurance, but cannot be used to pay for any type of insurance premiums, including long-term care insurance premiums.
- The **Dependent Care Flexible Spending Account (DCFSAs)** can be used to pay for eligible dependent care expenses such as childcare for children under age 13 or children who are physically or mentally incapable of self-care and, in some cases, eldercare, so that you – and your spouse, if you are married – can work, look for work, or attend school full-time.

Your participation in either FSA is completely voluntary, and it's important to remember that unlike other Federal benefits, your FSA election is only effective for one Benefit Period. In other words, you must enroll in one or both FSAs each year that you choose to participate. If you do not enroll during Open Season, you will not participate in the next Benefit Period, unless you experience a Qualified Life Event (QLE) that allows you to make an election outside of Open Season. Open Season for FSAFEDS runs concurrently with the FEHB Open Season in November and December each year for enrollment

in the following year. The FSAFEDS Benefit Period will always run from January 1 through March 15 of the following year.

You may set up an account, within 60 days of hire and your election(s) will become effective the day following acceptance of your enrollment. If you enroll during Open Season, your election(s) will not be effective until January 1 of the new Benefit Period. You cannot enroll on, or after, October 1 of any Benefit Period.

To enroll or find more information visit:

http://www.opm.gov/insure/federal_employ/index.asp?ProgramId=5.

Long Term Care Insurance

Long term care insurance helps defray the costs of assistance with activities of daily living, such as bathing and dressing. It also includes the kind of care you would need if you had a severe cognitive impairment like Alzheimer's. It covers skilled, intermediate and custodial care in your home, an adult day care center, an assisted living facility, a nursing home, or a hospice facility. Some plans such as the Federal Long Term Care Insurance Program also cover home care from informal providers such as friends, neighbors and family members who didn't normally live with you at the time you became eligible for benefits.

You are eligible to apply for coverage if you are a permanent or term employee during the first 60 days of your employment. You must apply directly for this coverage yourself at the Long Term Care website <http://www.ltcfeds.com/>.

Life Insurance

The Federal Employees' Group Life Insurance (FEGLI) program, as the name implies, provides group term life insurance. In most cases, eligible employees are automatically covered by basic life insurance unless you waive this coverage. You must waive the insurance by completing the Life Insurance Election form (SF 2817) and filing it with your employing office before the end of your first pay period. If you do not complete the SF 2817, you will automatically get Basic insurance. When you waive Basic insurance, you automatically waive Optional

insurance. Withholdings will be made from your first paycheck.

The cost of basic insurance is shared between you and the government. In addition to the basic life insurance, there are three forms of optional insurance that you may elect. Unlike the Federal health benefits program, which has annual opportunities to join or change coverage levels, FEGLI open seasons are rare; elections of coverage generally must be made when first offered, by a qualifying life event or by requesting to elect coverage and completing a physical at your own expense. There is no guarantee that your request by this last method will be granted. You may cancel FEGLI elections at any time. An FEGLI calculator and more information are available at <http://www.opm.gov/insure/life>.

When you retire, you are eligible to continue life insurance if you meet *all* of the following requirements:

- You are entitled to retire on an immediate annuity under a retirement system for civilian employees;
- You have been insured for the 5 years of service immediately before the date your annuity starts, or for the full period(s) of service during which you were eligible to be insured if less than 5 years;
and
- You have not converted to an individual policy.

Medicare

All employees contribute a portion of their earnings towards the Medicare Hospital Insurance Tax (HIT). This tax is included in the FICA deductions for employees who pay the social security tax; while other employees have a specified amount withheld from their salary. This tax is withheld from your gross earnings and is discontinued when yearly earnings reach the maximum wage base level determined by the Social Security Administration.

Retirement

Most new employees are in the Federal Employees Retirement System (FERS). That system generally covers everyone hired since January 1, 1984. However, if you had previous Federal employment under the "old" Federal

retirement program, the Civil Service Retirement System (CSRS), and were rehired, you may have been rehired under that system, called CSRS-Offset, which is a mix of CSRS and Social Security coverage.

The systems have fundamental differences in how benefits accumulate. FERS is a three-part retirement system consisting of Social Security coverage, a civil service annuity, and the Thrift Savings Plan. FERS employees retiring with an unreduced annuity after 30 years will receive a basic benefit equal to 30 percent of their high three years of average salary as compared to 56.25 percent for CSRS and CSRS-Offset employees. FERS employees will be eligible for a Social Security benefit.

For more information about retirement, see the OPM web site at <http://www.opm.gov/retire/> or contact the Human Resources Office.

Survivor Benefits upon Death of Employee

Federal retirement systems protect your loved ones. Under FERS the surviving spouse of an employee who had at least 18 months of creditable civilian service may be eligible for a basic employee death benefit, so long as the spouse:

- was married to the deceased for an aggregate of at least nine months (the nine-month requirement does not apply if the death was accidental); or
- was the parent of a child born of the marriage (including one born posthumously, or out of wedlock if the parties later married).

This benefit may be payable to a former spouse (in whole or in part) if a qualifying court so orders.

(Note: The rules are somewhat different for those under the CSRS retirement system.)

Thrift Savings Plan

The Thrift Savings Plan (TSP) is the government's version of the popular 401(k) plan. The TSP is a payroll withholding based plan. Investments are from pre-tax dollars and investment earnings are tax deferred until withdrawn. You can choose between two tax treatments for your TSP

contributions:

- Traditional (pre-tax)—you defer paying taxes on your contributions and their earnings until you withdraw them. If you are a uniformed services member making tax-exempt contributions, your contributions will be tax-free at withdrawal but your earnings will be subject to tax.
- **NEW!** Roth (after-tax)—you pay taxes on your contributions as you make them (unless you are making tax-exempt contributions), and your earnings are tax-free at withdrawal as long as you meet certain IRS requirements.

FERS employees are allowed to invest up to an amount set annually by the IRS. The percentage you can contribute is limited only by the IRS limit. Your agency will automatically contribute an amount equal to one percent of your basic pay each pay period. You make your own contribution by payroll deductions and your agency matches those contributions according to the following schedule:

FERS Employee Investment - Agency Match:

- First 3% of basic pay \$1.00 for each \$1.00 you invest
- Next 2% of basic pay \$0.50 for each \$1.00 you invest

CSRS and CSRS-Offset employees may invest a percentage of their salary in the program; they receive no government contributions.

The TSP open seasons were eliminated in July 2005 so you are able to begin investments, change the amount of investment or change the allocation of how much money you have going into each of the TSP's investment funds at any time. You also can move your account balances among the funds whenever you choose through interfund transfers at the TSP website, <https://www.tsp.gov/index.shtml>.

The TSP sends participants statements twice **annually** showing account balances, loan status, vesting status and other information. This information is also available on the website after you register for a password protected log in.

You can begin contributing your own money to the TSP within 60 days of being hired as a Federal employee. Your payroll contributions will begin the first full pay period after your

agency accepts your TSP Election Form (TSP-1).

If you were hired between June 1 and November 30, the agency will start to make agency contributions the first full pay period in the following June.

If you were hired between December 1 and May 31, the agency will begin making agency contributions the first full pay period in the following December. Agency matching contributions don't start until the employee's own investments begin.

If you are a rehired FERS or CSRS employee who had a break in service of **31 or more full calendar days**, regardless of whether you were enrolled prior to your break, you will be automatically enrolled in the TSP unless you elect to contribute immediately upon rehire. You can change or stop your contributions at any time after you are rehired. To learn how, visit Starting, Changing, and Stopping Your Contributions. If you are a FERS employee, your Agency Automatic (1%) and Agency Matching Contributions (if you are contributing your own money) will also begin immediately.

If you are a rehired FERS or CSRS employee who had a break in service of **less than 31 full calendar days** and you were previously contributing to the TSP, your employee contributions and, if you are FERS, your agency contributions, will resume upon rehire. If you were not previously contributing, you can begin at any time by following the instructions in Starting, Changing, and Stopping Your Contributions. Be aware that the TSP automatic enrollment rules do not apply to your situation.

Currently, the TSP has five investment funds available:

- **Government Securities Investment Fund** (G Fund), special Treasury issues with an average maturity date of about 14 years;
- **Common Stock Index Fund** (C Fund), which tracks the Standard and Poor's 500 index of large U.S. stocks;
- **Fixed Income Index Investment Fund** (F Fund), a combination of corporate and government bonds;
- **Small Capitalization Stock Index Investment Fund** (S Fund), tracking the Wilshire 4500; and
- **International Stock Index Investment Fund** (I Fund), which tracks the Morgan Stanley EAFE index.

Visit <http://www.tsp.gov> for more information on TSP and TSP Roth.

Life Cycle Funds

Life Cycle Funds are another TSP option. The L Funds diversify participant accounts among the G, F, C, S, and I Funds, using professionally determined investment mixes that are tailored to different time horizons. Your "time horizon" is the date (after you leave Federal service) that you think you will need the money in your TSP account.

Because it is important for each L Fund to maintain its target investment mix, the TSP will automatically rebalance each L Fund daily. The investment mix of each fund adjusts quarterly to more conservative investments as the fund's time horizon shortens.

There are five L fund options:

Choose	If your time horizon is:
L 2040	2035 or later
L2030	2025 through 2034
L2020	2015 through 2024
L2010	2008 through 2014
L Income	Sooner than 2008

You can track funds' performance at the TSP website without a password.

In-Service Loans and Withdrawals

You may access your money during your working career through loans (and in-service withdrawals). When you take a TSP loan, you are borrowing from yourself. Loans are repaid through payroll allotments over the payment period specified in the loan agreement. You can repay the loan in full—plus any unpaid interest—before the end of your loan repayment schedule without penalty.

TSP Catch-Up Provisions

Employees entering the year of their 50th birthday are allowed to make supplemental tax-deferred contributions to their TSP accounts in addition to the regular contributions defined in the basic entitlement (above).

For more information, please use the TSP website at <http://www.tsp.gov/> or the TSP ThriftLine at:

Telephone: 1-TSP-YOU-FRST (1-877-968-3778)

TDD: 1-TSP-THRIFT5 (1-877-847-4385)
(for hearing-impaired participants)

Telework

Telecommuting or telework is working at an alternate location within the organizational unit's commuting area on a routine, scheduled, infrequent, or recurring basis. Positions intentionally located at a college, university, specified location etc., or advertised with a duty station outside of the organizational unit because of the requirements of the position do not meet the definition of telecommuting.

Telecommuting is a management option, not an automatic right of employees. Telework participation requires an approved written agreement signed by the telecommuting employee and his or her supervisor, outlining the details of the telecommuting program and the responsibilities of the employee and the supervisor. Management may cancel or modify the agreement at any time, after discussion with the employee, if the agreement fails to benefit and/or meet organizational needs.

Telecommuting may be for a long-term recurring basis (over six months, up to one year), for a short-term basis (six months or less), or for an infrequent basis (as needed, no set schedule, when projects/assignments have short turnaround times and/or require intense concentration). Credit hours may be earned while teleworking. NRCS will supply supplies equivalent to that of employees not teleworking. For more information refer to the General Manual Title 360 Part 429.

Employee Associations

The USDA Employee Services and Recreation Association information is available at: <http://www.usdaesra.org> or by calling 1-800-626-3772. Membership in ESRA is open to all USDA employees (including retirees), their families, and contract employees within the Department. Currently, there is no membership fee. Formed in 1906, the association provides

a variety of services and programs to USDA employees including discounts on travel, fitness center and products. Many NRCS offices have local employee associations.

Transit Benefit Program

Employees who use public transportation to commute to work may be eligible to participate in a Transit Benefit Program that reimburses up to \$125/month in transportation costs. Contact Human Resources for information. (Updated FY12: <http://www.irs.gov/pub/irs-irbs/irb11-45.pdf>).

Job Protections

Anti-Discrimination Laws

Federal employees are protected from discrimination under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Age Discrimination in Employment Act of 1967, and the Equal Pay Act of 1963, and Section 501 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. These laws are enforced by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. Generally speaking, under those laws it is illegal to discriminate in any aspect of employment including: hiring and firing; compensation, assignment, or classification of employees; transfer, promotion, layoff, or recall; and recruitment and testing. Discriminatory practices under those laws also include: harassment on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, national origin, disability, or age.

Title VII also prohibits discrimination because of participation in schools or places of worship associated with a particular racial, ethnic, or religious group. The law prohibits not only intentional discrimination, but also practices that have the effect of discriminating against individuals because of their race, color, national origin, religion, or sex. See <http://www.eeoc.gov/facts/qanda.html> for more information.

Appeal Rights

Career employees receiving disciplinary actions from their supervisor may be eligible to appeal to the Merit Systems

Protection Board (MSPB). Another form of appeal is the administrative grievance, which normally covers workplace disputes and disciplinary actions not within the MSPB's jurisdiction.

NRCS encourages early resolution of workplace and program disputes using the Alternative Dispute Resolution Program. These procedures vary, contact Human Resources.

Civil Rights and Equal Employment Opportunity

NRCS is committed to ensuring that every customer and colleague is treated with fairness, equality, and respect; and without regard to race, color, national origin, gender, religion, age, disability, sexual orientation, marital or family status, political beliefs, parental status, or protected genetic information.

In NRCS, we strive for a workplace that is inclusive and respectful of differences, while working toward unity and harmony. And we deliver programs and services to all people fairly, with integrity and equality.

Civil Rights Advisory Committee (CRC)

In NRCS, each state has a Civil Rights Advisory Committee. The mission of the Florida CRC is to assist the State Conservationist in facilitating fair and equitable treatment of USDA customers and employees by identifying emerging issues, (recommending solutions/making suggestions), and providing NRCS employees with guidance/support to assist in and ensure the delivery of Civil Rights programs and activities.

In fulfilling our mission to assist the State Conservationist in the development and operation of the Civil Rights Program in Florida, the Committee identifies emerging issues and solicits suggestions from personnel on all phases of the program. Based on those issues and suggestions, the Committee recommends appropriate policies and procedures to the State Conservationist each quarter.

Members serve voluntarily for three year terms and are drawn from all positions and areas of the state. There are 13

representatives on the Committee, including all special Emphasis Program Managers. Members are active in field office reviews, area meetings, and training and discussion groups.

The State Conservationist, as the Deputy Equal Employment Opportunity Officer, designates a Civil Rights Advisory Committee Chairperson and the Assistant State Conservationist (Administration) serves as the Civil Rights Committee Advisor.

Grievances/Alternative Dispute Resolution

Several processes are available to NRCS employees to address employment-related concerns. Most issues can be easily resolved by simply sitting down with the other party and calmly discussing the situation. However, occasionally outside assistance is helpful to reach resolution. NRCS firmly endorses the use of Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) to address issues when they first arise. Under ADR, a trained mediator works with the parties involved to identify common ground and facilitate the use of a structured process to address concerns and reach agreements. Your supervisor or the Human Resources Office will be happy to provide you with additional information about ADR at your request.

When informal methods don't fully address an employee's concerns, there are two formal methods that may apply: the administrative grievance process, and the EEO complaint process. Information on these systems may be found in GM 360 Human Resources 412 Administrative Grievance System and GM 230 Equal Opportunity 401 Equal Employment Opportunity, or you may contact your supervisor or the Human Resources Office for additional information. Or see <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/people/outreach/sep>.

Reasonable Accommodations

It is the policy of NRCS to make reasonable accommodations to the known physical or mental limitations of qualified applicants or employees with disabilities except when such accommodation would cause an undue hardship to the Agency.

For more information, read the general manual section on accommodations at

<http://policy.nrcs.usda.gov/viewerFS.aspx?hid=19174>

The USDA Target Center is available to ensure that all USDA employees have safe and equal access to electronic and information technology by assessing, educating, and advocating for the integration of assistive technology and worksite accommodations. For more information call the Target Center at 202-720-2600 or <http://www.usda.gov/oo/target/>.

Drug-Free Workplace Policy

The Natural Resources Conservation Service, in light of its responsibility to protect the natural resources of this country, has a compelling obligation to eliminate illegal drug use from its workplace. The use of illegal drugs by employees can impair the ability of those employees to perform tasks that are critical to carrying out the NRCS mission. Use of illegal drugs can also result in increasing the potential for accidents and other failures that pose a serious threat to health and safety.

It is the policy of the Natural Resources Conservation Service that the unlawful manufacture, distribution, dispensation, possession or use of any controlled substance is expressly prohibited on workplace premises, or in connection with the performance of any employee's duties. In order to remain in the employ of the Federal government, any individual who violates this drug abuse policy will be required to seek professional drug abuse counseling from an approved rehabilitation program, in addition to any legal action which may be forthcoming. Individuals who refuse such counseling, or are convicted of a second offense, will be subject to disciplinary action.

The Executive Order under Section 503 of the Supplemental Appropriations Act of 1987 established uniformity among Federal agency drug testing plans and confidentiality of drug testing results.

The NRCS plan includes the following types of drug testing:

- Random testing of employees in testing-designated positions.

- Reasonable suspicion testing.
- Applicant testing.
- Injury, illness, unsafe or unhealthful practice testing.
- Voluntary testing.
- Testing as part of or as a follow-up to counseling or rehabilitation.

General Manual Title 360 part 420.180 and Department Personnel Manual Supplement 792-3 (Drug Free Workplace) should be consulted for further guidance concerning the Drug Free Workplace Program.

Smoking Policy

Smoking is restricted in all federal offices and vehicles. Smoking is allowed in designated areas only.

Automated Systems

WebTCAS (Web-based Total Cost Accounting System) & Timekeeping

WebTCAS, an internet-based timekeeping system, is where you will record the hours you work. At the end of each two-week pay period, you finalize and submit your timesheet to your assigned timekeeper.

Your supervisor will provide training to you on the use of WebTCAS and the program, activity and county codes you will use to record your work status. It is important that you accurately record not only your hours of work and leave, but also the activities in which you are involved. The website is <https://webtcas.sc.egov.usda.gov/webtcas/main.jsp>.

EmpowHR/Human Resources Information System (HRIS)

EmpowHR/HRIS is an automated system for processing personnel actions. The data in this system is integrated with WebTCAS. The Human Resources Office provides an EmpowHR/HRIS ID and password to you during your first pay

period with NRCS. When you receive them, you will have access to the system to view your personal data as recorded by the Human Resources Office. The web site is <https://icams.usda.gov/>.

eAuthentication

The USDA eAuthentication Service is used by USDA agencies to enable customers and employees to obtain accounts that will allow them to access USDA Web applications, and services via the Internet. NRCS uses the eAuthentication Service to protect many of its Web applications and services (e.g., WebTCAS, my.NRCS, PRS, etc.).

NRCS requires the use of the employee's alpha-numeric EmpowHR Operator Login ID (e.g., JJ012345) as the User ID for their eAuthentication account.

NRCS employees should not register using their first and last names, or any other User ID format. The employee registration process uses employee payroll and personnel data from the National Finance Center (NFC) to confirm their identity as an employee with the USDA. Employees will receive an email prompting them to register for an eAuthentication account.

AgLearn

AgLearn is the USDA enterprise-wide learning management system (LMS) available for all USDA Federal employees. In AgLearn you may take USDA web-based courses after you have discussed the course with your supervisor and received their approval. An AgLearn account will be automatically set up within 2-3 weeks of hire. Required courses will automatically be loaded on the "To-Do List." AgLearn may be accessed using your eAuthentication log-in and password at <http://www.aglearn.usda.gov/>.

NFC Employee Personal Page

You also have access to your own Employee Personal Page (EPP) through the USDA National Finance Center (NFC) using your eAuthentication user ID and password at <https://www.nfc.usda.gov/personal/>. The Employee Personal Page allows you to view your payroll, leave, travel, life insurance, health insurance, savings bonds, and other

personal information and make changes as you require. You will be able to view and print copies of your "Earnings and Leave Statements" and W-2 forms. It is important to verify that the statement accurately reflects required and optional deductions. Report any errors to your Human Resources Office immediately. You are also responsible for notifying Human Resources of any change in your name, home address, and family status.

My NRCS

The My NRCS Intranet site <http://my.nrcs.usda.gov> was developed in 2003 to improve communications with NRCS employees. This site links to all other NRCS websites and provides updates on agency programs, guidance and events.

Information & Records

Personal Records

An electronic official personnel file (EOPF) is maintained by the Human Resources Office. You have the right to review the contents of your EOPF upon request. Although many records associated with your federal employment are maintained in your EOPF, it is important that YOU keep a copy of important documents pertaining to your employment, such as:

- Your résumé
- SF-50 Notification of Personnel Action
- Position Description
- Election of benefits (e.g., health & life insurance, TSP enrollment, designation of beneficiary)
- Performance Work Plan & Appraisal
- Training plan, certifications & transcripts Awards

It is in your interest to verify the accuracy of information on employment-related documents, and to call any errors to the immediate attention of the Human Resources Office.

The Privacy Act of 1974

You will have occasion to handle an array of information and records concerning the land, landowners and land users who

receive technical assistance from NRCS. You need to understand the impact of pertinent records guidelines, particularly, The Freedom of Information Act and the Privacy Act, on the way we handle this information.

As a government employee you may have to work with or handle records or information about individuals. Generally, such records will require special handling and safeguarding because they are subject to the requirements of the Privacy Act. The Privacy Act establishes special requirements for collecting, creating, maintaining, and distributing records that can be retrieved by the name of an individual or other identifier (whether in paper or electronic form). These are called Privacy Act Systems of Records. Our Conservation Plan files are one example of a Privacy Act System of Records.

The subject of a Privacy Act System of Records can ask to see, correct, and appeal the information in that record. These disclosure restrictions are subject to civil and criminal penalties. For more information, contact your Freedom of Information Act (FOIA)/Privacy Act Officer. In Florida, the Assistant State Conservationist (SPA) is the FOIA/PA Officer.

The Freedom of Information Act (FOIA)

The Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) is meant to ensure that the public has access to information that is maintained by the government. FOIA also recognizes that the government must safeguard certain information that falls under one of the nine FOIA exemptions. Some of the requirements of the Electronic FOIA Amendments of 1996 ensure access to government information maintained in all formats (e.g. E-mail, back-up tapes), and makes more information available to the public electronically. (See the NRCS Freedom of Information Act website)

http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detailfull/national/about/?cid=NRCS143_021450

If you receive a request from the public for information, you will need to consult with your supervisor to determine whether the material requested is public or nonpublic information. Even if a request does not cite FOIA, you should still consider whether it is protected under FOIA or the Privacy Act. Refer to GM 120 Administrative Services Part 408 Records

for additional information. Records that are not routinely made available to the public must be requested under FOIA procedures to ensure a thorough review for sensitive information. Consult your supervisor and the FOIA Officer for additional information.

Information Technology Security

Personal Responsibility

IT Security is the personal responsibility of each computer user. The difference between a secure computer system and one that is vulnerable is how the users apply the security measures that are available. You will be required to take an annual web-based cyber security course. All new employees must complete a computer user security agreement. The following measures are your computer security responsibilities.

Never share your user ID or password with anyone else. Don't tape user IDs and passwords to desks, walls, or terminals, or write them down and store them in list finders, desk drawers, etc. Do not save a user ID and password on the hard drive of a notebook computer. Passwords should be a mix of letters, numbers and characters, and be at least eight characters. Avoid using any word found in the dictionary as a password. Never use personal information (names of family members, pets, etc.) for your password.

Either log-off or use a password protected screen saver when you are away from your desk even briefly. Log-off when you leave the office.

Do not open attachments to e-mail messages unless you are positive they could not contain a virus. Never use software or files obtained from the Internet before scanning them for viruses. Do not install software on government computers without first obtaining approval from your IT Specialist. Scan any storage media that has been received from an outside source. Insure that the current version of approved virus

scanning software is installed and activated on your computer, and use it.

Computer files on the server are automatically backed-up. Your IT specialist can advise you on the backup procedures you should use for any file that you save on your hard-drive. If these files must be manually backed up, do so frequently. Always keep backups of your files in a secure location. Never use unlicensed software on your computer. It is illegal to make copies of copyrighted software.

Remedy Ticket

If you have a computer problem and need assistance, you should make your request whenever possible through the Remedy Ticket program for an information technology specialist to assist you. The website is: <https://itsm-info.sc.egov.usda.gov/default.aspx>.

Background Investigations, E-Verify, and Selective Service Registration

Successful Background investigations including fingerprints are required for all employees who use government computers. You must complete investigation paperwork and fingerprint charts within your first week of employment. The National Agency Check with Inquiries (NACI) is the minimum background investigation for all applicable Federal employees, long term volunteers, and contractors. A few positions will require a higher level security investigation. This requirement is designated in the Homeland Security Presidential Directive (HSPD) 12.

E-verify is a program in which employment eligibility of all newly hired employees is confirmed after the Employment Eligibility Verification Form (I-9) has been completed. The I-9 must be completed and verified within the first 3 days of employment. The EVerify system involves an on-line check of databases maintained by the Social Security Administration and the Department of Homeland Security. This system verifies your eligibility to work for the federal government. In most cases, you must be a U.S. citizen to be a federal employee which is also part of the background investigation paperwork.

Selective Service registration is required of all males born after December 31, 1959. This registration is verified by Human Resources online through the Selective Service Database and is also a question on the background investigation paperwork. Failure to register with the Selective Service, if you are required, can result in removal.

Travel and Transportation

Travel

You may be required to travel to attend training courses or to conduct official Government business. An employee on official travel is expected to exercise the same care in incurring expenses that a person would when traveling on personal business. All travel is to be coordinated with your supervisor to avoid overtime compensation work periods (when possible) and high travel costs.

Travel Expenses and Authorization

All travel must be approved by your supervisor. If you are required to travel for official purposes, you will be reimbursed for expenses essential to the transaction of official business. Allowable costs include transportation, per diem (which consists of lodging up to a certain amount), and a meal and incidental expenses (M&IE) allowance. Not all expenses incurred while traveling are considered necessary. You must request a travel authorization from the Financial Management Section PRIOR to traveling.

Government Travel Credit Card

Employees are mandated to use their government-issued travel charge card to pay for reimbursable travel expenses. All permanent employees who travel at least twice a year must participate in the government travel charge card program.

Every employee is provided detailed information about appropriate and inappropriate uses of the travel credit card, and signs an agreement to abide by the card's terms and conditions, before the card is issued.

Any employee who uses the charge card for inappropriate or non-official purposes or who fails to pay their account balance in a timely manner will be subject to disciplinary action, which can range from a letter of reprimand to removal from duty.

Employees are encouraged to charge as many **official** travel expenses to the credit card as possible since this will help maximize the rebates paid to the government by the bank.

Use of Motor Vehicles

Most NRCS positions in Florida are incidental motor vehicle operators, because we must drive to meet with our clients in order to provide technical assistance. Your position description specifies whether you are an incidental motor vehicle operator – if you are, you are required to maintain a valid State Driver's License. Employees who fail to maintain a valid driver's license or who misuse a GOV may be subject to disciplinary action including possible removal.

Government owned vehicles (GOV) may be used by employees for official purposes only. Willful misuse of GOVs carries a mandatory minimum penalty of 30 days suspension without pay; misuse of GOVs may be subject to further disciplinary action up to and including removal.

Safety and Health

Accident Reporting and Worker's Compensation

The Federal Employees Compensation Act (FECA) provides workers' compensation benefits to federal employees who sustain job-related injuries or illnesses.

IF YOU ARE INJURED WHILE IN THE PERFORMANCE OF DUTY, THEN YOU MUST notify your supervisor immediately, or within 24 hours of the date of injury, and request that an "Injury Packet" be sent *next-day* delivery.

The Injury Packet should contain the following forms:

- **CA-1** Notice of Traumatic Injury & Claim for Continuation Compensation (notice that employee sustained a job-related traumatic injury)
- **CA-16** Authorization of Examination and/or Treatment (signed by supervisor to authorize medical treatment for a job-related traumatic injury)
- **CA-17** Duty Status Report (used to determine employee's ability to perform duties of position - supervisor's portion to be completed prior to issuance to injured employee)
- **CA-20** Attending Physician's Report (completed by physician to provide medical support for claim)

Upon receipt of the Injury Packet, immediately complete the appropriate form (Form CA-1 - Notice of Traumatic Injury and Claim for Continuation of Pay/Compensation -OR- Form CA-2 - Notice of Occupational Disease and Claim for Compensation) and fax or hand-deliver it to your supervisor within two (2) days of the date of injury. You may download these forms: <http://www.dol.gov/owcp/dfec/regs/compliance/forms.htm>.

When you return the form, ask for a signed copy for your records, which includes the completion of the Supervisor's Report. Please **DO NOT** send forms directly to OWCP. Human Resources will send the forms CA-1 and CA-2 to OWCP within 10 days of the injury. Failure to comply with the steps listed above could result in a delay in processing your claim and/or in the denial of your claim and/or benefits.

Contact Human Resources, within three days of delivering form CA-1 or CA-2 to your supervisor, to ensure that they also have a copy of the completed form. If not, you should fax them a copy.

Take Forms CA-17 and CA-20 from the packet with you to your initial doctor's visit. (Important: Please check that the Supervisor's portion of Form CA-17 is complete prior to giving it to your doctor. If not, ask your Supervisor to complete their portion of the CA-17 and submit it to you right away). Form CA-20 will be used for all subsequent visits to the doctor. Your Supervisor should provide additional CA-20s as often as needed).

OTHER ACTIONS YOU MUST TAKE

- ✓ Return to work as soon as medically possible.
- ✓ Call your supervisor and timekeeper on a weekly basis to update them on all absenteeism relevant to the work-related injury and the status of your ability to return to work in a light or full duty status.
- ✓ Continue to submit medical evidence (Form CA-20 or doctor's narrative) to your supervisor for all days taken off from work due to the work-related injury.
- ✓ Ensure that copies of all medical documents sent to your supervisor are also received by Human Resources.
- ✓ At the request of your supervisor, contact your doctor's office (billing department) to resolve billing errors. (Important: This is necessary because FECA law indicates that the injured employee is the only one with the legal right to contact the doctor by telephone.)
- ✓ Select a physician that meets the definition of "physician" under the FECA and who must not have been excluded from payment under the program.

Important: Employees, who wish to change physicians after the initial choice, must contact Human Resources in writing for approval and include the reasons for wanting to change. (See Chapter 6 of OWCP Publication CA-810) and/or OWCP Website:

<http://www.dol.gov/owcp/dfec/regs/compliance/DFECfolio/CA-810.pdf>.

If you receive a bill from your doctor, send it directly to Human Resources and be sure to include your claim number on EVERY page you send.

Direct all other inquiries regarding your claim to the FL State Office Human Resources Staff at (352) 338-9518.

Important: A number of statutory provisions (20 CFR - 10.16) make it a crime to file a false or fraudulent claim or statement with the government in connection with a claim under the FECA, or to wrongfully impede a FECA claim.

Important: Administrative proceedings may be initiated under the Program Fraud Civil Remedies Act of 1986 (PFCRA), 31 U.S.C. 3801-12, to impose civil penalties and assessments against persons who make, submit, or present, or cause to be made, submitted or presented, false, fictitious or fraudulent claims or written statements to OWCP in connection with a claim under the FECA.

Important: Several sources describing the provisions of the law and how they are applied are available in printed form and on OWCP's Home Page at <http://www.dol.gov/owcp/>.

You are responsible for completing and submitting to your supervisor: - The appropriate Dept. of Labor Office of Worker's Compensation Programs (OWCP) form (CA-1, CA-2). Type directly on the Electronic CA-1 (Federal Employee's Notice of Traumatic Injury and Claim for Continuation of Pay/Compensation) or CA-2 (Notice of Occupational Disease and Claim for Compensation) Form. Print and sign Form and send to your supervisor.

Your supervisor is responsible for submitting: - The appropriate Dept. of Labor OWCP form (CA-16, or CA-17) to the Human Resources Office.

IF **THEN:**

You have already visited the doctor and given them Forms CA-17 and CA-20.	Follow-up with the doctor’s office within five days from the date you delivered the forms to ensure that they returned them to OWCP and your supervisor. If not, request a fax copy of the forms and fax them to your supervisor. Important: A medical report is required by the Office of Worker’s Compensation Program before payment of compensation for loss of wages or permanent disability can be made to injured employees.
Your doctor recommends physical or occupational therapy.	Deliver the Physical & Occupational Therapy Authorization Request Form, located in your Injury Package, to your doctor.
Your doctor recommends surgery or other general medical procedures.	Deliver the General Medical & Surgery Authorization Request Form, located in your Injury Package, to your doctor.
Your doctor recommends special medical equipment.	Deliver the Durable Medical Equipment Authorization Request Form, located in your Injury Package, to your doctor.
You are incapacitated and cannot perform these tasks.	If able, identify in writing, someone who is capable of acting on your behalf.
You are receiving Continuation of Pay (COP).	You must provide prima facie medical documentation that supports your work-related injury to your supervisor within ten working days from the date of injury or you could risk termination of COP benefits.
Your doctor has returned Forms CA-17 and CA-20.	You are not required to provide additional prima facie medical documentation to your supervisor during this period of COP. Important: Submitting the initial prima facie medical documentation is necessary to continue receiving COP. Failure to do so could result in delays and/or termination of your benefits.
It appears that you will be disabled beyond the 45 day COP period.	You must complete Form CA-7 (Claim for Compensation). Within five days of receipt of the CA-7, attach current medical documentation and fax or hand-carry it to your supervisor.
You do not qualify for COP.	You must complete Form CA-7 immediately, attach current medical documentation, and fax or hand-carry it to your supervisor.
You will be claiming a Schedule Award.	You must complete Form CA-7 and fax or hand-carry it to your supervisor when the doctor determines that you have reached maximum medical improvement.

Important: You are responsible for the necessary follow-up with Human Resources to ensure that the CA-7 is received and processed.

Employee Assistance Program (EAP)

The Employee Assistance Program (EAP) is available to all NRCS employees and their immediate family to help resolve personal and work problems. Marital, financial, alcohol, drugs, family, vocational, work related stress, legal referral, weight/weight loss, physical/medical, dependent care, emotional/psychological counseling are all available through our EAP.

Our EAP provider is Sand Creek Ltd. If you would like to use their services, please call them at 1-888-243-5744 or by email at info@sandcreekeap.com. A professional EAP counselor will work directly and confidentially with you or your family member to help resolve the issue. In some cases, the EAP counselor's role will be to assist in determining how you may use your health insurance or community resources most effectively for future services. EAP services are provided to you at no cost by NRCS. All services are confidential.

Dress Code

You must dress appropriately for each occasion. Your office or work setting and environment will influence your dress style. Always be neat and clean in whatever you choose to wear. Clothing should be clean and free of rips, tears, or holes. Your dress style will project a positive or negative image about "you". You broadcast a message in what you wear. We suggest you make an accurate statement in your appearance and transmit a positive, professional image at all times. Remember that your dress is a reflection of you and the Agency.

While there is no enforceable dress code in NRCS, you are expected to dress professionally to match the occasion. Shorts, short skirts, crop tops, t-shirts with advertising, etc. are not appropriate dress.

Talk to your supervisor and co-workers about safety considerations that you should take into account when heading out to the field (e.g., heavy boots, long sleeves, hats, etc.).

Emergency Response Plan

The Emergency Response Plan is posted on a bulletin board in each office. Please review it carefully and discuss any questions you may have with your supervisor so you will be prepared in the event of an emergency.

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Common NRCS Acronyms

AC	Area Conservationist	FEGLI	Federal Employees Group Life Insurance
AACP.....	Accelerated Conservation Planning Project	FEHB	Federal Employees Health Benefits
ACRES ...	Actual Cost Recovery Evaluation System	FEMA ...	Federal Emergency Management Agency
ADP.....	Automated Data Processing	FERS	Federal Employees Retirement System
ADR	Alternative Dispute Resolution	FEFFLA .	Federal Employees Family Friendly Leave Act
AFCD	Association of Florida Conservation Districts	FFIS	Foundation Financial Information System
AL	Annual Leave	FIP	Forestry Incentive Program
AO	Administrative Officer	FLSA	Fair Labor Standards Act
ASTC	Assistant State Conservationist	FMLA ...	Family and Medical Leave Act
CCC	Commodity Credit Corporation	FNM	Financial Management
CCE	Common Computing Environment	FO	Field Office
CED	County Executive Director	FOIA	Freedom of Information Act
CET	Civil Engineering Technician	FOTG....	Field Office Technical Guide
CFC	Combined Federal Campaign	FRPP.....	Farm and Ranchland Protection Program
CFR	Code of Federal Regulations	FSA.....	Farm Service Agency
CISA	Community Involved in Sustaining Agriculture	FTE	Full -Time Equivalent
CO.....	Conservation Operations	FWP	Federal Women’s Program
COLA.....	Cost of Living Adjustment	GAO	Government Accountability Office
CR	Civil Rights	GIS.....	Geographic Information System
CRM.....	Coordinated Resource Management	GLCI.....	Grazing Lands Conservation Initiative
CRP	Conservation Reserve Program	GM	General Manual
CSRS.....	Civil Service Retirement System	GOV	Government-Owned Vehicle
CTA	Conservation Technical Assistance	GS.....	General Schedule
CTAP	Career Transition Assistance Program	HACU ...	Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities
DC	District Conservationist	HBCU....	Historically Black Colleges and Universities
EA	Environmental Assessment	HEL.....	Highly Erodible Land
EAP	Employee Assistance Program	HEP	Hispanic Employment Program
EBI	Environmental Benefits Index	HRO.....	Human Resources Office
ECP	Emergency Conservation Program	IAS.....	Integrated Accountability System
EE.....	Environmental Evaluation	ICTAPI ..	Interagency Career Transition Assistance Program
EEO.....	Equal Employment Opportunity	IDP	Individual Development Plan
EEOC.....	Equal Employment Opportunity Commission	IFAS.....	Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences
EIS.....	Environmental Impact Statement	IRM	Information Resource Management
EOEA.....	Executive Office of Environmental Affairs (state)	IT.....	Information Technology
EQIP.....	Environmental Quality Incentive Program	KCCC	Kansas City Computer Center
EWP	Emergency Watershed Program	KSA.....	Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities
FAC	Food and Agriculture Council	LAN	Local Area Network
FACTA...	Food, Agriculture, Conservation, Trade Act of 1990	LWOP ...	Leave Without Pay
FAIR	Federal Agriculture Improvement and Reform Act	M&IE....	Meals and Incidental Expenses
FDACS...	Florida Dept of Agriculture and Consumer Services	MLRA ...	Major Land Resource Area
		MO	MLRA Office
		MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
		NACD ...	National Association of Conservation Districts
		NAD.....	National Appeals Division
		NCC	National Computer Center
		NEDC....	National Employee Development Center

NEPA..... National Environmental Policy Act
 NFAC..... National Food and Agriculture Council
 NFC..... National Finance Center
 NFSAM.. National Food Security Act Manual
 NHCP National Handbook of Conservation Practices
 NHPA National Historic Preservation Act
 NHQ National Headquarters
 NPPH National Planning Procedures Handbook
 NRCS Natural Resources Conservation Service
 NRHP National Register of Historic Places
 NRI..... National Resources Inventory
 O&M..... Operation and Maintenance
 OGC..... Office of General Counsel
 OIG Office of the Inspector General
 OJT..... On-the-Job Training
 OMB Office of Management & Budget
 OPF..... Official Personnel Folder
 OPM Office of Personnel Management
 OSHA Occupational Safety and Health Administration
 OTI..... Opportunity to Improve
 OWCP ... Office of Workers Compensation Programs
 PA Program Assistant (FSA)
 PAS Public Affairs Specialist
 PAW..... Performance Appraisal Worksheet
 PC Personal Computer
 PD Position Description
 PFT Permanent Full-time
 PMC Plant Materials Center
 POV Privately Owned Vehicle
 PP Pay Period
 PPT Permanent Part-time
 PRS Performance and Results System
 Pub. L.... Public Law or (P.L.)
 QSI Quality Step Increase
 RAC..... Regional Assistant Chief
 RC&D Resource Conservation and Development
 RD..... Rural Development
 RMS..... Resource Management Systems
 SAO..... State Administrative Officer
 SCE..... State Conservation Engineer
 SCEP..... Student Career Experience Program
 SED State Executive Director (FSA)
 SEPM Special Emphasis Program Manager
 SES..... Senior Executive Service
 SF..... Standard Form
 SHPO State Historic Preservation Officer

SL Sick Leave
 SO State Office
 SRC..... State Resource Conservationist
 SSN..... Social Security Number
 SSS State Soil Scientist
 STC..... State Conservationist
 STEP..... Student Temporary Employment Program
 SWCD... Soil and Water Conservation District
 T&A..... Time and Attendance
 TCAS..... Timekeeping System
 TDD Telecommunication Device for the Deaf
 TSP Thrift Savings Plan
 USC United States Code
 USDA.... United States Department of Agriculture
 WAN Wide Area Network
 WebTCAS Web-based Total Cost Accounting System
 WGI..... Within Grade Increase
 WHIP Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program
 WLA Workload Analysis Initiative
 WLMA.. Workload Management Analysis
 WMD ... Water Management District

Useful Government Websites

USDA

<http://www.usda.gov/>

NRCS

<http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/>

NRCS-Florida

<http://www.fl.nrcs.usda.gov/>

my.NRCS

<https://my.nrcs.usda.gov>

EmpowHR/HRIS/iCAMS

<https://icams.usda.gov>

AgLearn

<http://www.aglearn.usda.gov>

EAP-Employee Assistance Program

<http://www.sandcreekeap.com/>

Ethics

<http://www.usda-ethics.net>

OPM-Office of Personnel Management

<http://www.opm.gov/>

Insurance Programs (FEHB, etc.)

<http://www.opm.gov/insure/>

TSP-Thrift Savings Plan

<http://www.tsp.gov/>

EPP-Employee Personal Page

<https://www.nfc.usda.gov/personal/>

OWCP Claims Procedures

<http://www.tandtmanagement.com/OWCP/OWCP.asp>

BENEFEDS

<https://www.benefeds.com/>

USA Jobs

<http://www.usajobs.gov/>

USDA Connect

<https://connections.usda.gov>

USDA Employee Directory

<http://offices.sc.egov.usda.gov/employeeDirectory/app>

Florida Organizational Chart

