

Subpart B - Monetary Recognition

Part 414 – NRCS Employee Recognition Program

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414.10 Extra Effort Awards

A. Extra Effort Awards are lump-sum cash payments (minus applicable taxes), ranging from \$50 to more than \$10,000 (depending on the significance of contribution), that recognize individuals or groups who make significant one-time contributions to the strategic plan, mission objectives, and goals of the Agency and/or Department. Extra Effort Awards may be given for a specific outstanding accomplishment, such as a superior contribution on a short-term assignment or project, an act of heroism, scientific achievement, major discovery, or significant cost savings.

B. All employees are eligible for Extra Effort Awards. Award amounts exceeding \$750 require written justification. Amounts of \$750 or less require only a brief written description of the accomplishment.

414.11 Performance Bonus Awards

A. Performance Bonus Awards are lump-sum cash payments for recognition of accomplishments that exceed expectations as described in the employee's annual performance plan.

B. In determining the amount of a bonus award, the Nominating and Designated Approving Official must consider: the employees rating assigned for each element; consistency of awards given to other employees with similar ratings; and the scope and complexity of the position. For example, employees who have exceeded the standards for all elements (critical and non-critical) should receive a larger bonus than employees who have exceeded the standards for several of their elements. Another factor to consider is the inherent difficulty of the position. For example, a GS-12 or 13 position is inherently more difficult and complex than a GS-6 or 7 position, and if the employees are rated the same or close, then the higher graded position should receive a larger bonus award.

C. Employees who have one or more elements rated at "marginal" or lower are not eligible for any performance bonus payout. Employees who have all elements rated at "fully successful" or higher may be eligible for a bonus payment, but are not automatically entitled to a bonus payout. Rating Officials are responsible for requesting that bonus awards be given to their subordinate employees.

D. Employees who are rated "fully successful" have met all of the quality and quantity requirements called for in their performance standards are valued employees of the agency and are making a valuable contribution to the agency.

E. The following provides a range for potential bonus awards based on the final adjective rating assigned for non-SES employees:

(1) Outstanding: 3 to 10 percent of base pay (without locality). See other sections for required approval.

(2) Superior: 1.1 percent up to 2.9 percent of base pay (without locality).

(3) Fully Successful: No bonus up to 1 percent of base pay (without locality).

(4) Performance Bonus Awards are based on the employee's most recent rating of record. Performance Bonus Awards are intended to recognize individual performance and may not be given for group contributions.

(5) Since Performance Bonus Awards are based on the employee's annual rating, employees may receive only one award within a 52-week period, and not in conjunction with a QSI. All employees (except for SES non-career employees) are eligible for Performance Bonus Awards.

F. Quality Step Increase (QSI) Awards

(1) A Quality Step Increase (QSI) Award is an individual award given as an additional within-grade increase (WGI) for outstanding performance, without regard to required waiting periods, that increases an employee's base pay. Like Performance Bonus Awards, QSIs are based on the employee's most recent rating of record.

(2) QSIs may be granted when an employee's final adjective rating is "outstanding."

(3) Employees may receive only one QSI during a 52-week period, and not in conjunction with a Performance Bonus Award. All employees (except for SES and wage-grade employees) are eligible for QSIs.

NOTE: QSIs may not always be appropriate or be advantageous to employees, such as if the employee is about to receive a promotion or vacate his or her position. Rating Officials should consult their Servicing Human Resources Office for further guidance.

G. Presidential Rank Awards – SES Career Appointees

(1) Presidential Rank Awards are governed by 5 U.S.C. 4507 and recognize and reward SES career appointees who have demonstrated exceptional performance over an extended period of time. The two types of rank awards are as follows: The Distinguished Executive Rank Award is given for sustained extraordinary accomplishment to no more than 1 percent of the career SES government-wide. This award includes a lump-sum payment (minus applicable taxes), a distinctive gold pin, and a framed certificate signed by the President. The Meritorious Executive Rank Award is given for sustained accomplishment to no more than 5 percent of the career SES government-wide. This award includes a lump-sum payment (minus applicable taxes), a distinctive silver pin, and a framed certificate signed by the President.

(2) The Secretary of Agriculture provides recommendations to the Director of OPM for review and approval. The Director of OPM provides USDA and NRCS nominations and recommends candidates to the President. The President makes the final selections from the nominees recommended by the Director of OPM. USDA/NRCS may not make any external announcement of award recipients before a formal White House announcement.

414.12 Spot Awards

A. Spot Awards are lump-sum cash payments (grossed up to cover applicable taxes), ranging from \$50 to a maximum of \$750 net pay, that grant immediate recognition (within 3 business days from the date the award is processed) to individual employees for their day-to-day extra efforts and significant contributions that warrant smaller awards that affect or support/enhance the accomplishment of the Agency's strategic plan, mission goals and objectives. Examples include one-time noteworthy achievements that deserve recognition but that may not meet the criteria for other types of awards; volunteering for an extra or emergency assignment while maintaining own workload; using personal initiative and creativity to solve an unusual problem; or producing a work product of exceptionally high quality under tight deadlines.

B. Based on the Non-measurable Benefits Scale (see Subpart D, Exhibits, Section 414.31), Spot Awards are considered to be moderate in value. Usually, the contributions recognized will have been completed within a period of 4 to 6 weeks.

C. All employees (except SES and equivalent employees) are eligible for Spot Awards and may receive more than one Spot Award within a one-year period. Although Spot Awards are intended to recognize individual contributions, they may be given for group contributions as well. There is no ceiling on the total amount of any group spot award; however, the award amount for each group member must not exceed \$750. When submitting a group nomination the official submits Form AD-287-2, Recommendation and Approval of Awards, and attaches a separate page with a list of each employee's name, social security number, position title, grade, organization and location (if different from other group members), and dollar amount.

D. All Spot Awards, including awards for groups, are processed as individual awards using award code C024 – Individual Cash Award – Spot. Once the award is processed by the Servicing Human Resources Office, it will be sent directly to the employee's "salary check address" within 2-3 business days.

414.13 Suggestion/Invention Awards

A. Suggestion/Invention Awards are lump-sum cash payments (minus applicable taxes) that recognize individuals or groups who adopt and implement written suggestions or develop inventions that significantly improve the efficiency and/or effectiveness of Government operations, and that support or enhance accomplishment of strategic plan and/or mission goals and objectives of the Agency, Departmental, or Federal government. Award amounts are based upon either the Measurable or Non-measurable Benefits Scale in Subpart D, Exhibits, Section 414.31.

B. A suggestion is a constructive proposal that results in a savings or an improvement to the Federal Government, directly contributing to its economy, efficiency, or productivity. All Federal employees are eligible for suggestion/invention awards. In order to be considered a valid suggestion, the idea must be documented in writing by one or more employees, and in the form of a complete proposal, posing a solution to a current or potential problem, or an opportunity to effect change. Implemented suggestions result in process improvement that saves the Government time and/or money. Suggestions may result in actual dollars savings, a higher quality product or service, or make it easier to get work done. A suggestion must result in at least one of the following:

- (1) Reduction in the cost of operations or service.

- (2) Elimination of unnecessary operations or service.
- (3) Improvement in the quality of operations or service.
- (4) Development of new tools, equipment, processes, or procedures to accomplish the preceding purposes.

C. Most suggestions will be related to the employee's own job, as the employee closest to the job is often in the best position to recommend improvements for his/her function or operation. Recognition, including cash awards, will not be denied or reduced because a suggestion is unfairly considered "just part of the job." Recognition is appropriate for any suggestion that is outside the employee's authority to implement without higher level approval or that has application outside the employee's immediate work unit. Managers are encouraged to allow employee participation in the implementation of adopted suggestions.

D. Ideas that are incomplete and those dealing with employee services, benefits, working conditions, minor revisions of forms, or routine safety or maintenance practices are excluded from consideration under the employee suggestion program.

E. Form AD-287, Employee Suggestion, (see Subpart D, Exhibits, Section 414.34) is used to submit suggestions. In addition, a statement must be included that addresses any testing of the suggestion that may have been done or a statement as to why testing was not feasible. If a test was conducted, any data resulting from the test should be included. If a test was not conducted, the economics or analysis of the estimated costs of implementation and estimated value of benefits must be addressed.

F. The National Employee Suggestion Program (ESP) Coordinator for NRCS will be located in the Human Resources Management Division at National Headquarters (NHQ) and is responsible for the following:

- (1) Providing administration and promotion of the NRCS Employee Suggestion Program.
- (2) Serving as the NRCS liaison to the USDA Office of Human Resources Management.
- (3) Maintaining a tracking system to monitor the status of all suggestions referred to NHQ or to agencies other than NRCS for evaluation, and to provide information for program analysis and reporting.

G. State Conservationists, Area Directors, Centers Directors, and NHQ will designate an ESP Coordinator for their office who is responsible for the following:

- (1) Receiving and reviewing employee suggestions.
- (2) Promptly acknowledging the receipt of a suggestion and forwarding it to the appropriate subject-matter and program specialist for evaluation, with guidelines on evaluation requirements and a requested response date.
- (3) Monitoring the status of suggestions and evaluations to ensure that they are processed according to established time frames.
- (4) Communicating with employees on the progress and final disposition of suggestions.
- (5) Ensuring that adopted suggestions are promptly implemented by the subject-matter specialist (s).
- (6) Referring suggestions to the Director, Human Resources Management Division, for further processing when the following conditions exist:
 - (i) The referring office lacks authority to implement the suggestion, but reviewers believe the suggestion has merit.
 - (ii) The suggestion has been adopted for use at the local level and there is reasonable assumption that the suggestion may merit wider application.

Suggestions should be carefully screened before they are referred to NHQ in order to ensure that they merit additional evaluation and review. All suggestions must be submitted in duplicate.

H. Upon receiving an employee suggestion to evaluate, the subject-matter and program specialist shall:

- (1) Review the suggestion for a thorough understanding of the employee's idea. If necessary, the suggestion may be discussed with the employee to clarify the idea or to request additional information.
- (2) Include an analysis of feasibility and relative advantage over current practice, a cost-benefit analysis (including cost to implement and estimated first-year benefits), and a recommendation to adopt or not

adopt, with justification for the recommendation.

(3) A reasonable time frame for evaluating and processing suggestions locally is 30 days. Suggestions submitted to NHQ for further evaluation or application should be processed within 30-60 days after receipt and within 90 days if departmental approval is required. More time may be needed to properly evaluate some suggestions; therefore, it is important that the employee making the suggestion be advised of any delays in the decision process that will extend the expected time frame for a final response. The following guideline should be used by the ESP Coordinator for establishing standards of timeliness: Initial Processing (acknowledgment, screening, logging, and referral to evaluating office) should be completed within 3 to 5 working days of receipt, depending on the difficulty of determining eligibility, screening for duplication of a previous suggestion, or determining the appropriate evaluating office.

(i) Evaluation should be completed and returned to the ESP within 15 to 20 days of referral. If a suggestion is referred to the wrong office for evaluation, it will be returned to the coordinator with a recommendation as to the appropriate office within five (5) working days.

(ii) Response to the employee on a final decision should be provided within 5 to 10 working days of the evaluation and final decision to adopt or not adopt. More time may be needed if the coordinator must obtain further information from the evaluating office and/or obtain several clearances for the final response to the employee.

(iii) Cash awards for adopted suggestions shall be based on the Measurable or Non-measurable Benefits scale (Subpart D, Exhibits, Section 414.31). For suggestions with tangible benefits, the measurable benefits scale guideline should be the minimum amount of an award. For suggestions with multi-agency application or benefits, the benefiting agencies will jointly determine the proportionate award amounts to be paid for an approved suggestion.

(iv) For more information regarding the USDA Employee Suggestion Program, including a copy of the program brochure, employees should contact their local Servicing Human Resources Office. Employees can also obtain a copy of the program brochure on the web <http://www.usda.gov/da/employ/websuggestionbrochure.htm>. All employees are eligible for Suggestion/Invention Awards.

414.14 Program Evaluation

The Human Resources Management Division will be responsible for evaluating the recognition program annually to assess the fair and equitable distribution of awards and to recommend any operating or policy changes. This report is to be issued during the second quarter of the fiscal year so any changes can be implemented prior to the end of the fourth quarter.