

U.S. Office of Personnel Management  
Office of Merit Systems Oversight and Effectiveness  
Classification Appeal and FLSA Programs

Atlanta Oversight Division  
75 Spring Street, SW., Suite 972  
Atlanta, GA 30303-3109

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

**Appellant:** [Appellant]

**Agency classification:** Soil Scientist  
GM-470-13

**Organization:** U.S. Department of Agriculture

**OPM decision:** Soil Scientist  
GS-470-13

**OPM decision number:** C-0470-13-01

/s/

\_\_\_\_\_  
Kathy W. Day  
Classification Appeals Officer

6/7/00 \_\_\_\_\_  
Date

As provided in section 511.612 of title 5, Code of Federal Regulations, this decision constitutes a classification certificate that is mandatory and binding on all administrative, certifying, payroll, disbursing, and accounting officials of the Government. The agency is responsible for reviewing its classification decisions for identical, similar, or related positions to ensure consistency with this decision. There is no right of further appeal. This decision is subject to discretionary review only under the conditions and time limits specified in title 5, U.S. Code of Federal Regulations, sections 511.605, 511.613, and 511.614, as cited in the Introduction to the Position Classification Standards, appendix 4, section G (address provided in appendix 4, section H).

**Decision sent to:**

[Appellant]

[Administrative Officer  
U.S. Department of Agriculture]

Mr. Roger L. Bensey  
Director, Office of Human Resources  
Management  
U.S. Department of Agriculture  
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1400 Independence Avenue, S.W.  
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Ms. Karen W. Karlinchack  
Personnel Officer  
Natural Resources Conservation Service  
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South Building, Room 6210  
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## **Introduction**

On January 19, 2000, the Atlanta Oversight Division of the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM) accepted a position classification appeal from [appellant] who is employed as a Soil Scientist, GM-470-13, in the [organizational location], U.S. Department of Agriculture, [geographic location]. The appellant believes that his position should be classified as Soil Scientist, GS-470-14.

The appeal was accepted and processed under section 5112(b) of title 5, United States Code. This is the final administrative decision on the classification of the position subject to discretionary review only under the limited conditions and time outlined in part 511, subpart F, of title 5, Code of Federal Regulations.

## **General issues**

The appellant disagrees with the evaluation made by the agency Research Position Evaluation Committee (RPEC). He believes that the technical duties associated with his research and the quality of his contributions were not properly recognized. He provided documentation showing his accomplishments, special invitations, society memberships, advisory and professional consultation activities, other special assignments, publications, and abstracts to support his appeal.

This decision is based on written information furnished by the appellant and the agency, as well as telephone interviews with the appellant's supervisor, and one of the appellant's peers (identified by the appellant for contact).

## **Position information**

The appellant is assigned to position description number [#]. The appellant, his supervisor and the agency have certified the accuracy of the position description.

The appellant is responsible for planning, developing, and conducting an erosion and conservation research program. The research involves laboratory experiments, mathematical modeling, and program field experimentation to solve erosion problems and improve soil use. The appellant must be knowledgeable of pertinent principles and techniques to investigate soil properties and consider geological, hydrological, and physical science factors for research assignments. He also must be knowledgeable of complex laboratory instruments to perform research assignments. He investigates the role of soil properties in soil erosion and sediment and water movement in fragipan soils. He serves on the RPEC panel, which evaluates case materials and research for his organization. The appellant supervises two employees.

The appellant works under the supervision of the Research Leader who establishes overall objectives of the work. The appellant independently plans, develops and carries out research

responsibilities. The supervisor is kept informed of major changes which need his approval. Completed assignments are considered technically authoritative and are normally accepted without change.

### **Series and title determination**

The agency classified the position in the Soil Science Series, GS-470, which covers positions involving professional and scientific work in the investigation of soils, their management, and their adaptation for alternative uses. The appellant does not contest his series determination, and we agree.

The appellant's supervisory responsibilities do not meet the minimum criteria for coverage under the General Schedule Supervisory Guide (GSSG). The GSSG is used to grade General Schedule supervisory work and related managerial responsibilities that:

- require accomplishment of work through combined technical and administrative direction of others; and
- constitute a major duty occupying at least 25 percent of the position's time; and
- meet at least the lowest level of Factor 3, in the guide.

His supervisory responsibilities do not occupy the required 25 percent of his time. Therefore, the appellant's position is excluded from coverage under the guide and no supervisory designation is included in the title.

The authorized title for nonsupervisory positions in this series is *Soil Scientist*.

### **Standard determination**

Soil Science Series, GS-470, June 1970.  
Research Grade Evaluation Guide, June 1976.

### **Grade determination**

The Soil Science Series, GS-470, classification standard provides criteria for nonresearch positions. The Research Grade Evaluation Guide is used for research positions.

Part I of the guide consists of four factors: Factor I- The research situation or assignment; Factor II – Supervision received; Factor III – Guidelines and originality; Factor IV – Qualifications and scientific contributions. The appellant disagrees with the agency's evaluation of Factors I, III, and IV. We have reviewed the agency determination for Factor II and concur

with their findings. Therefore, our evaluation will address only those factors questioned by the appellant.

Degrees A, C, and E with point values of 2, 6, and 10 are used to define and evaluate the proper degree of work assigned. Definitions are not included for intermediate Degrees B and D with point values of 4 and 8. However, they are to be used when an element is determined to fall between the defined degrees.

*Factor I- The research situation or assignment:*

This factor deals with the nature, scope, and characteristics of current studies being undertaken by the incumbent.

The agency evaluated this factor at Degree C, where the employee is responsible for formulating and conducting a systematic research attack on a problem area of considerable scope and complexity. The scope must be approached through a series of complete and conceptually related research studies carried out by the employee or a team where the employee is the leader. In terms of complexity, problems are difficult to define; require unconventional or novel approaches and sophisticated research techniques; and/or present other features of difficulty.

Research studies will result in a series of published contributions that will :

- (a) answer important questions in the scientific field, account for previously unexplained phenomena, and open significant new avenues;
- (b) represent an important contribution to the validation or modification of scientific theory or methodology;
- (c) result in important changes in existing products, processes, techniques, or practices;
- (d) be definitive of a specific topic area.

The appellant is responsible for soil erosion research. The research involves designing projects, developing procedures, taking and testing samples, and writing findings. The appellant typically functions as a member of a team or sometimes as a leader, and supervises two lower graded employees when investigating soil erodibility and other soil properties. The appellant points out specific complex assignments that he believes support a higher evaluation:

- The identification of the cement agents responsible for fragipan horizon formation. He states this is a significant contribution to soil science and with further research, the team could design an amendment that will degrade this horizon much faster.
- The development of a system for delineating soil erodibility of landscape. This is a contribution to soil science which will improve ability to predict soil and nutrient losses from watersheds accurately.

- The soil response to amendments research. This has the potential to produce results that may have a significant impact on erosion control and could be beneficial for the use of the iron oxide sludge material amendment project which is presently being researched.

These assignments meet the complexity, scope, and characteristics of Degree C. The appellant's work requires sophisticated methods and novel approaches to systematically research soil erosion, sedimentation and control. He must use complex laboratory equipment. Successful completion of his research will result in important contributions (e.g., answer important questions, modify methodology or existing processes) in the areas of soil erosion, erosion data, and new amendment approaches. His research typically results in publishable contributions to the field.

The appellant's work does not meet Degree E where the research involves attacking basic research problems recognized as exceptionally difficult and unyielding to analysis. The solutions represent advances of great significance in areas of exceptional interest. The appellant's research includes investigating soil erosion and sediment movement, rooting and water movement in fragipan soil, and soil responses to tillage and amendment practices. We find no indication that the appellant is engaged in an area that has been unyielding to research analysis or that the solutions to the problems he is researching would represent advances of great significance. The term "great significance" would involve an advance significantly beyond that described at Degree C, which includes accounting for previously unexplained phenomena, opening significant new avenues for further study, or contributing in an important way to validating or modifying scientific theory. The appellant's work does not go beyond these Degree C characteristics.

Degree C is assigned for 6 points.

*Factor III – Guidelines and originality:*

This factor deals with the creative thinking, analyses, syntheses, evaluation, judgment, resourcefulness, and insight that characterize the work performed in the current job situation.

At Degree C, basic research, available guides and precedents (e.g., existing literature in the field) are limited in usefulness or may be largely lacking because of the novel character of the work being done. A high degree of originality is required in defining problems which are very elusive and/or highly complex; in developing productive hypotheses for testing; in identifying significant problems for study in developing important new approaches, methods, and techniques; and in interpreting and relating the significance of results to other research findings. This degree typically involves development and application of new techniques and original methods of attack to the solution of important problems presenting unprecedented or novel aspects. This includes application of a high degree of insight to isolate and define the critical features of the problems and application of a high degree of originality and ingenuity in adapting, extending, and synthesizing existing theory, principles and techniques into original and non-obvious

combinations or configurations, and in defining and conducting the specific research studies necessary for the solution to the problems.

The appellant's work is comparable to Degree C. Available literature on landscape position/soil hydrology and soil erodibility interactions is limited. A high degree of originality is required in defining problems and developing hypotheses; and techniques and methods must be developed or require major adaptation. The appellant believes the originality required to determine the effects of amendments on soil stability and fragipan horizons and the need to develop sampling techniques merits Degree D. However, Degree C fully credits the "development and application of new techniques and original methods of attack to the solution of important problems presenting unprecedented or novel aspects."

Degree E describes a significant contribution to the development of new theory or methodology by marked importance (e.g., to the national economy). There is no evidence to support that the appellant has developed new theories or methods that have the kind of impact described at Degree E.

Degree C is assigned for 6 points.

*Factor IV – Qualifications and scientific contributions:*

This factor is not restricted to present and immediate past job performance. It is intended to focus on the total qualifications, professional standing, and recognition and scientific contributions of the researcher, as these bear on the dimensions of the current research situation and work performance.

At Degree C, the researcher has demonstrated his ability as a mature, competent and productive worker. He will typically have authored one or more publications of considerable interest and value to his field (as evidenced by favorable reviews, by citation in the work of others, by presentations of papers to professional societies, etc.) and/or he will have contributed inventions, new designs or techniques which are of material significance in the solution of important applied problems. His contribution involves leadership of a productive research team or leadership in the conception and formulation of productive research ideas (as evidenced by the fact that his ideas have been the basis for productive studies by others, within or outside his immediate organization), and/or highly productive (in terms of both quantity and quality) personal performance of research of such originality, soundness, and value as to have marked him as a significant contributor to his professional field. He is sought out for consultation by colleagues who are professionally mature researchers. Further evidence of his emerging recognition may be selection to serve in important committee assignments of professional groups. He is qualified to speak and deal responsibly concerning technical matters in his area of immediate specialization with researchers within and outside his own organization.

Degree C is met. The appellant has successfully authored publications, participated on committees and in meetings, led research teams, and represented the agency in his area of expertise. He performs with a marked degree of professional independence and technical authority. He is responsible for seeking out and pinpointing research needs. He is qualified to speak expertly on technical issues in his subject-matter area. The appellant is consulted by colleagues concerning the status and support of research matters, is familiar with the principal researchers in the subject-matter area, and is able to draw upon them for advice, assistance and participation in agency review committees. His qualifications and contributions are fully credited at Degree C.

At Degree E, contributions are of such magnitude that they move the art forward and other researchers must take note of the research to keep up with developments in the field. The researcher will have contributed inventions, designs or techniques which are regarded as major advances in basic or applied research and which have opened the way for extensive further developments or solved problems of great importance to the scientific field. Also at Degree E, the employee must have authored a number of important publications which have a major impact. While the appellant's accomplishments are notable, they have not impacted the field or other researchers in the way Level E describes. The appellant meets Degree C and does not approach Degree E.

Degree C is assigned for 6 points.

<b>SUMMARY</b>		
<b>FACTOR</b>	<b>LEVEL</b>	<b>POINTS</b>
Factor I, Research Assignment	C	6
Factor II, Supervision Received	D	8
Factor III, Guidelines/Originality	C	6
Factor IV, Qualifications/Contributions	C	12
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>32</b>

A total of 32 points falls within the range for GS-13, 26 to 32 points, according to the point-to-grade conversion scale in the Research Grade Evaluation Guide.

### **Decision**

The position is properly classified as Soil Scientist, GS-470-13.