

U.S. Office of Personnel Management  
Division for Human Capital Leadership & Merit System Accountability  
Classification Appeals Program

San Francisco Field Services Group  
120 Howard Street, Room 760  
San Francisco, CA 94105-0001

**Classification Appeal Decision**  
**Under section 5112 of title 5, United States Code**

**Appellant:** [Appellant's name]

**Agency classification:** Soil Scientist  
GS-470-11

**Organization:** [Appellant's organization/location]  
Natural Resources Conservation Service  
U.S. Department of Agriculture

**OPM decision:** Soil Scientist  
GS-470-11

**OPM decision number:** C-0470-11-01

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Carlos A. Torrico  
Classification Appeals Officer

July 3, 2003  
Date

As provided in section 511.612 of title 5, Code of Federal Regulations, this decision constitutes a 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 conditions and time limits specified in the *Introduction to the Position Classification Standards*, appendix 4, section G (address provided in appendix 4, section H).

**Decision sent to:**

[Appellant's name and address]

[Address of appellant's servicing human resources office]

Natural Resources Conservation Service  
U.S. Department of Agriculture

Director, Human Resources Management Division  
Natural Resources Conservation Service  
U.S. Department of Agriculture  
14<sup>th</sup> and Independence Ave., SW.  
Room 6210-S  
Washington, DC 20250

Director, Human Resources Management  
USDA-OHRM-PPPD  
U.S. Department of Agriculture  
J.L. Whitten Building, Room 302W  
1400 Independence Avenue, SW.  
Washington, DC 20250

## **Introduction**

On January 28, 2003, the San Francisco Oversight Division, now the San Francisco Field Services Group, of the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM) accepted a classification appeal from [name of appellant]. On March 4, 2003, we received the agency's complete administrative report concerning the appeal. The appellant's position is currently classified as Soil Scientist, GS-470-11, but he believes it should be graded at the GS-12 level. The appellant works in the [appellant's organization/location], Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), U.S. Department of Agriculture. We have accepted and decided his appeal under section 5112 of title 5 United States Code (U.S.C.).

This decision is based on a thorough review of all information submitted by the appellant and his agency. In addition, an OPM representative conducted separate telephone interviews with the appellant, his immediate supervisor (the Assistant State Soil Scientist), and the [name of state] State Soil Scientist.

## **General issues**

The appellant makes various statements about the agency's evaluation of his position. Classification appeal regulations permit OPM to investigate or audit a position and decide an appeal on the basis of the actual duties and responsibilities currently assigned by management and performed by the employee. An OPM appeal decision classifies an operating position. This decision is based on the work currently assigned to and performed by the appellant and sets aside any previous agency decision. By law, we must classify positions solely by comparing their current duties and responsibilities to OPM position classification standards and guidelines (5 U.S.C. 5106, 5107, and 5112). Therefore, the classification practices used by the appellant's agency in classifying his position are not germane to the classification appeal process.

## **Position information**

The appellant and the [name of state] State Soil Scientist certified to the accuracy of the appellant's official position description (PD), [number]. The [name of state] State Soil Scientist certified in lieu of the appellant's immediate supervisor because he supervised the appellant when the Assistant State Soil Scientist position was vacant. On February 9, 2003, the newly appointed Assistant State Soil Scientist became the appellant's immediate supervisor.

The appellant is one of three Soil Scientists assigned to the Assistant State Soil Scientist. His position provides technical guidance, soil resource information, and technical assistance to NRCS field offices within Divisions V and VI covering 16 counties and five Major Land Resource Areas (MLRA's). He applies soil information and interpretations to specific needs, gathers site specific soil data, generates interpretation maps, helps external and internal customers understand soil surveys, and provides custom soil reports and Geographic Information Systems (GIS) maps. These maps are generated from the National Soil Information System (NASIS) or the Soil Data Viewer program. He conducts site specific special soil survey investigations and provides documentation, interpretation, database and GIS support to Soil Survey Projects involved in the update mapping process for his Divisions. Also, he handles field

checks of soil textures and water table depths for Confined Animal Feeding Operations (CAFO's) in Divisions V and VI, as requested. Besides managing the NASIS soil databases used by the 16 field offices in Divisions V and VI, he provides assistance and guidance to such field staffs in their use of soils information on the Field Office Computer System and the Soil Data Viewer and Arc-View programs within the Customer Service Toolkit. Other tasks that he is responsible for include providing soil data for on-site investigations, handling hydric soil identification for wetland determinations and/or delineations, participating in Field Office Technical Quality Assurance Reviews, assisting with land and/or soil judging contests, and promoting and implementing the wise use of soil resources.

The results of our interviews, the appellant's PD, and other information in the record furnish more information about the appellant's duties and responsibilities and how they are carried out.

### **Series, title, and standard determination**

The appellant's agency has classified his position to the Soil Science Series, GS-470, and titled it Soil Scientist. The appellant does not disagree. We concur with the agency's title and series determination.

As discussed below, we have evaluated the grade of the appellant's duties by reference to the grading criteria in the standard for the Soil Science Series, GS-470.

### **Grade determination**

The GS-470 standard considers two classification factors to evaluate the grade of positions: (1) Nature of assignment, and (2) Level of responsibility. Nature of assignment deals with variety and purpose of duties performed, scope and significance of assignments, difficulty and complexity of duties, knowledge requirements, and judgment required to accomplish assignments. Level of responsibility considers the impact of interpretations or findings, supervision or guidance received, planning responsibilities, review of recommendations, commitment authority, work related contacts, availability of guidelines, and adaptation of guidelines.

#### *Nature of assignment*

At the GS-11 level, soil scientists independently conduct or oversee the conduct of the full range of types of soil surveys and irrigation suitability surveys. This includes those less detailed and exploratory assignments that require well-developed judgment to combine soils which may be quite dissimilar into major groupings, generalize about their characteristics, and to predict their behavior under stated conditions. Sometimes their work areas are ones in which no previous mapping or land classification has been done, or the existing coverage is inadequate or out of date. The assignment may be in support of an irrigation, forestry, range program, or basic mapping of an area. The work area may be a county, a forest area, a town-and-country planning area, an irrigation project, or other designated work area. GS-11 soil scientists recognize and combine significant kinds of soils for interpretation and management. Using considerable judgment and experience, they adapt procedural manuals and policy issuances to specific local

conditions. They develop work plans, submit reports on status of work, and write manuscripts for the published survey reports and for other narrative management reports as required by their agency. Examples of illustrative assignments at the GS-11 level from the standard include the following:

- (1) Independently conduct or lead a soil survey party for an assigned area to identify, classify, and map soils for areas where soils are little known and in intricate patterns; write soil survey report manuscript; provide technical assistance on soils interpretations for urban, industrial, resource, and land use; prepare soils maps, land resource maps, and interpretive maps for land uses.
- (2) Investigate concerns with soil salinity; conduct drainage studies to evaluate installed drains or to investigate permeability of the soil, water holding capacity, water in relation to soil erosion control, and desirability of drainage and installation of drainage tiles.
- (3) Serve as the soil scientist in an analysis team composed of natural science specialists to plan and conduct an investigation of a watershed, to gather and integrate data from such an investigation, to point out specific problems found in the investigation, to make recommendations for changes in practices, and to prepare a narrative report which contains findings and interpretations in support of recommendations.

GS-12 level soil scientists are assigned highly difficult tasks in various aspects of the soil science programs of their agencies. Their experienced judgment enables them to receive assignments in special problem areas where only the objectives to be met are specified. Since guidelines do not necessarily apply, they select techniques that require extension, adaptation, or development of guidelines and technical precedents pertinent to the problem. GS-12 soil scientists are typically called on to advice on a highly complex combination of soil-forming factors which give rise to a variety of soils arranged in unusual patterns. Some especially difficult areas to map are mountainous, glaciated, or alluvial areas. Unstable soils create soil management problems that require highly skilled GS-12 soil scientists to determine their potential use. This is in contrast to GS-11 soil scientists who resolve complex problems of more conventional nature that they encounter in their surveys. At this level they frequently provide technical guidance to less experienced soil scientists, reviewing their work for adequacy and accuracy, and correlate the soils that have been mapped. GS-12 soil scientists play a major role in developing guidelines and criteria for soil interpretations within their work areas, and maintain working relationships with personnel of Federal and non-Federal agencies. They project soil interpretations from surveyed areas to other areas for which basic data are not available without benefit of detailed field work.

The appellant's position favorably compares to the GS-11 level. Similar to work areas assigned to GS-11 soil scientists, the appellant's assigned work areas include ones for which existing coverage is inadequate, interpretations are out-of-date due to improved technology, and there are small sections with no previous mapping or land classification. Comparable to work complexity at the GS-11 level, the appellant must recognize and combine significant kinds of soils in five MLRA's for interpretation and management. Like the GS-11 level, he uses considerable judgment and experience to frequently adapt procedural manuals and policy issuances to specific

local conditions and prepares manuscripts for published surveys. His assignments favorably compare to the GS-11 work illustrations as discussed below:

- Like the first illustration, the appellant leads soil survey crews as the Acting Soil Survey Project Leader for soil surveys in his work area (Divisions V and VI). During soil surveys, he provides technical guidance and assistance in soil identifications, classification, interpretations, mapping, reports, and field reviews. In special soil investigations, he independently conducts investigations, identifies and classifies soils, groups soils into capability units, prepares soil maps, and writes survey report manuscripts. Furthermore, the appellant provides technical soil assistance to NRCS personnel in using soil interpretations for conservation planning and project activities, such as engineering practices, wetland inventories, waste disposal investigations, or watershed investigations.
- Like the second illustration, similar to the soil salinity and drainage types of investigations conducted by GS-11 soil scientists, the appellant frequently provides field checks of soil textures and water table depths for Confined Animal Feeding Operations (CAFO's). In these field checks, he investigates permeability of the soil, field capacity of water in relation to soil erosion control, and the desirability of drainage.
- Like the third illustration, the appellant serves as a team member on the State Office Technical Service team conducting Field Office Technical Quality Assurance Reviews in Divisions V and VI. As the only soil scientist on a analytical team composed also of an agronomist, a range conservationist, a biologist, and an engineer, he provides guidance on how technical soils data should be used in Field Office conservation planning and management. During such reviews he assures that the Field Office Technical Guides are current and complete, points out problems from his overall technical quality appraisal of the Field Office, makes recommendations as to changes needed, and prepares narrative reports on his findings.

The appellant's position does not meet the GS-12 level. Unlike that level, the appellant's assignments are not so difficult, particularly in special problem areas, that only the objectives to be met are specified. In contrast to the GS-12 level, guidelines generally apply to his work, although they may require some adaptation to deal with specific soil conditions. We found no evidence through our fact-finding that the appellant's assignments are typically in problem areas requiring him to develop guidelines or set technical precedents pertinent to the problem. While occasionally less experienced field soil scientists seek his advice, unlike the GS-12 level he neither checks their soil survey work for adequacy nor reviews their soil survey reports for conformance to standards, accuracy of facts presented, and consistency of interpretations. The types of soils encountered are little known and have intricate patterns but do not present the highly complex and unusual patterns typical of the GS-12 level.

#### *Level of responsibility*

GS-11 soil scientists are fully trained professionals who work without close technical supervision. They require technical guidance only in matters of unusually difficult soil

classifications or situations which require a great deal of adaptation of standard procedures or in cases of departure from policy. They have technical responsibility for broad and involved assignments, including drafting survey reports. GS-11 soil scientists frequently represent their agencies in particular localities in their contacts with agency and state and local government personnel, planning groups, land owners, etc. They must be sensitive to the public relations implications of those contacts.

GS-12 soil scientists work independently within established goals or objectives. They normally require no technical guidance except in significant policy matters. They formulate and recommend policy changes that affect their work areas. Their completed work is reviewed for compliance with policy and objectives and soundness of approach. Their recommendations and interpretations are bases for major private and public program and land use decisions, which may involve large amounts of time, money, and manpower. Their findings can result in initiation or cancellation of major projects and public works. GS-12 soil scientists are concerned with the broad applicability of their work outside their immediate work areas, and contribute to long-range planning efforts. Their contacts are varied and they sometimes represent their agencies at hearings on important technical issues.

The appellant's position meets the GS-11 level. Like soil scientists at that level, he works without close technical supervision and has full responsibility for his assignments. He independently carries out his soil service management and soil resource information distribution projects. He seeks technical guidance (from state office or other MLRA staffs) only when standard procedures or methods require a great deal of adaptation. His soil interpretations have an important impact on determining land use in Divisions V and VI and are complicated by a variety of land uses and complex soil distribution. He represents his agency within his area of jurisdiction, and must be sensitive to the public relations implications of his soil survey findings and recommendations.

The appellant's position does not meet the GS-12 level. Although the appellant independently performs his assignments, unlike the GS-12 level technical guidance is provided by higher level staff as needed. He does not formulate or recommend policy changes affecting his work area, and we found no evidence that his recommendations form the bases for major private and public program and land use decisions. While his findings significantly impact decisions on land use and soil management practices, they do not result in initiating or canceling major projects and public works. Additionally, the appellant is not involved in contributing ideas to long-range planning efforts. While his contacts are diverse, he does not represent his agency at hearings on important technical issues.

### *Summary*

By application of both grading factors in the GS-470 standard, the appellant's position meets the GS-11 level. Therefore, the grade of the position is GS-11.

### **Decision**

The appellant's position is properly classified as Soil Scientist, GS-470-11.