



HR Broadcast

NEW FEATURE ON THE WEB

The Human Resources Division has put together what we hope you'll find to be a useful tool in helping you manage and respond to actions, activities and information related to a variety of HR-related functional areas. For example, what type of personnel actions do I need to remember to initiate each month?, when does the annual reminder on "use or lose" annual leave come out?, when are those financial disclosures reports due? The HR Calendar provides you with this and lots more information! The Calendar will be kept up-to-date as information changes and will be available on our website for easy access by all our customers. We hope you will find this helpful!!

Be sure and check the calendar for the month of January!!!

Coming in the April Issue:

❖ **What is ETA?**



The Benefits Buzz

Medicare Prescription Drug Plan

From November 15, 2005, through May 15, 2006, Medicare beneficiaries will have the opportunity to enroll in a Medicare prescription drug program. Most Federal employees and Federal retirees do NOT need to enroll in the Medicare drug program, since all Federal Employees Health Benefits (FEHB) program plans have prescription drug benefits that are at least equal to the standard Medicare prescription drug coverage. Still, if you care for a parent or someone who needs to make this decision, please go to <http://www.medicare.gov/> to find out more about the choices.

Federal Long Term Care Insurance

Don't let unexpected long term care expenses jeopardize the lifestyle you and your loved ones have worked so hard to build. The Federal Long Term Care Insurance Program was designed exclusively for members of the Federal family. Learn how the Federal program can help you, your spouse, your parents, your parents-in-law, your step parents, and your adult children. Visit <http://www.ltcfeds.com/> or call 1-800-582-3337.

The Federal Long Term Care Insurance Program is sponsored by the U. S. Office of Personnel Management, administered by Long Term Care Partners, LLC, and offered by John Hancock Life Insurance Company of Boston, and Metropolitan Life Insurance Company of New York. The Federal program is medically underwritten, which means the applicant will have to answer health questions. Certain medical conditions, or combinations of conditions, will prevent some people from being approved for coverage.

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The Benefits Buzz (Continued)

Please review your statement of earnings and leave

Your paycheck is important to you, isn't it?

Every pay period, you receive a valuable and informative document from the National Finance Center (NFC) - your Statement of Earnings and Leave. Whether it comes to your mailbox, or you elected to go "paperless" by using NFC's Employee Personal Page at https://www.nfc.usda.gov/personal/ep_warning.asp, it is important that you take a few minutes to review your Statement each pay period to be sure that the deductions are accurate, especially if you have recently made a change which would affect your pay, such as:

- Health benefits election
- Flexible Spending Account deductions
- Life insurance election
- Thrift Savings Plan (TSP) contribution
- TSP catch-up
- TSP Loan repayments
- Federal Long Term Care insurance premiums
- Federal and State income tax withholding
- Savings bonds
- Charitable contributions
- Deposits to financial institutions
- Union or other association/membership dues

In addition to the above, your Statement will show required deductions for:

- Retirement coverage, if you are eligible (CSRS, CSRS Offset, or FERS)
- Social Security, if you are covered by CSRS Offset or FERS, or if you are not eligible for other retirement coverage
- Medicare tax

Your Statement also shows your leave earned and used. Please contact your Timekeeper if you have questions about your leave balances.

Your servicing personnel and payroll offices do their best to correctly enter documents into the NFC system, but mistakes do happen. If errors are reported quickly, it is relatively easy to correct them. If the error continues for an extended period of time, the effect on the employee can be very costly. Each employee has the responsibility to review their Statement of Earnings and Leave for accuracy and to promptly call any errors to the attention of the servicing personnel office. Take a few moments to review your Statement, and if you have any questions, please contact your servicing HR office at (612) 336-3281, and ask to speak to the Processing Associate for your agency program.

While checking your leave and earnings statement, don't forget that your W-2 is available on your Employee Personal Page, at https://www.nfc.usda.gov/personal/ep_warning.asp

THE STAFFING CORNER

Q: Exactly what does it mean to apply online?

You submit your resume and answer questions using the Internet. When you first access the system at the website you establish an account by answering user information questions and core Federal questions and loading your resume. The system will assign you a user ID. Your resume and answers to the user information and core Federal questions will be stored in the system. When you identify a vacancy for which you wish to apply click on the "Apply to this vacancy" button located at the bottom of the PEARS vacancy announcement. You will then respond on-line to a series of vacancy specific questions. Once you have responded to all the questions, you submit your application by clicking on the "Finished" button found at the end of the vacancy specific questions. When you submit your application your resume, answers to the user information, core Federal questions and answers to the vacancy specific questions will be submitted. You will receive confirmation of your application receipt. You may make changes to any part of your application.

PEARS POINTERS

Q: What if I need help applying?

For assistance in applying to PEARS vacancies, please refer to the FAQ "[How do I apply if I am a first time PEARS user?](#)" at the following website:

http://www.aphis.usda.gov/mrpbs/systems/pears/pears_applying.html#newuser

This FAQ has detailed instructions to help you through the application process. If applying online poses a hardship for you, you must call the Agency Contact listed in the announcement before the closing date of the announcement for assistance

Feedback Spurs Improvements in PEARS!

HRO would like to extend their thanks to all of the customers who have offered comments/feedback regarding the [Prospective Employee Application Rating System](#) (PEARS). In response to continued customer feedback, HRO has taken steps to further refine the applicant assessment and referral process through PEARS. One of the more significant changes involves the process by which we weight occupation-specific questions. This improved method actively engages the selecting official and/or subject matter expert into the development of the job analysis, and provides them with an opportunity to greatly influence the landscape of the certificate. The result is a clear connection between the knowledge, skills and abilities the program is seeking and those possessed by the top ranking applicants.

Again, HRO would like to say thank you to all of the selecting officials and administrative officers who have taken the time to fill out the PEARS quality review survey. This survey is sent about 30 days after you receive your certificate and can be submitted to our office anonymously. Your feedback is taken into consideration and helps us to make improvements to the hiring process

We would also like to take this opportunity to address some of the feedback we have received to date. The following are a few comments we have recently received from customers through the PEARS quality review survey.

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Comment: I like the old paper applications because they are familiar to me and allow the applicant to provide more examples and explanations of pertinent experience or knowledge he or she has relative to the KSAs.

HR Response: This information may still be captured from applicants using the PEARS. Selecting officials may select additional long and/or short answer narrative questions as follow-up or stand alone questions. The intent

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PEARS Pointers (Continued)

of these narratives is to require the applicant to substantiate their answer choices by providing specific examples and explanations pertinent to the major job functions of the position. Hiring officials are encouraged to contact their servicing HR specialist for advice on how to best utilize and/or tailor narrative questions when examining using the PEARS.

Comment: One of the negative comments regarding PEARS is that I have to pull up the entire package and print the applications (including the responses to PEARS questions). Time consuming for selecting official!

HR Response: Selecting officials need not print out all application packages. One efficient practice we are aware of consists of an initial web based review of all the application packages. Based on this initial review, identify the exemplary candidates and conduct a more comprehensive review of those candidates. From this point, the hiring official or review panel would have the option to conduct

subsequent reviews or proceed with the interview process. These steps assist in minimizing the volume of printing while still allowing the selecting official to make an informed decision.

Comment: The last time we used PEARS for recruitment was the fall of 2001, and we were not particularly impressed with it. However, this time around [2005] there was considerable improvement and worthwhile changes, and, overall, we thought it was a very good process.

HR Response: Thank you. HR recognizes customer comments/feedback play an integral role in continuous process improvement. To this end, we would like to encourage selecting officials and administrative officers to continue submitting comments

PROCESSING TIDBITS

SF-181, ETHNICITY AND RACE IDENTIFICATION FORM

Due to reporting requirement changes, the Office of Personnel Management has revised the SF-181 form. Beginning **January 1, 2006**, all **appointment actions** occurring on or after this date, the new SF-181 (dated July 2005) will be the government wide standard for reporting ethnicity and race information. **The revised form is now available on the OPM website and the NEO website.**

In the past, the information on the SF-181 asked employees to select the single race/ethnicity category with which he or she most closely identified. The revised SF-181 employs a two question format: (1) the first question asks whether or not the employee is of Latino/Hispanic ethnicity; and regardless of the response to the first question, (2) the second question asks the employee to mark an "X" next to any of the five given race categories that apply.

FEDERAL INCOME TAX W-4

If you claimed exempt from Federal tax last year and you do not expect to owe any taxes this year, you must file a **NEW W-4** claiming exempt status **BEFORE FEBRUARY 15 (PP 4)** of each year. Otherwise, tax withholdings will automatically be based on single with zero exemptions. No adjustment will be done to reimburse you for taxes withheld at the single rate.

Do you still have separated employees still showing up on your employee roster? First, remember that it can take up to four weeks following the processing of a separation action for the employee's name to drop off the roster. However, the retention of names of the roster may also be a result of the employee having unpaid annual leave or a negative leave balance.

HELFPUL HINTS

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Please remember that it is very important to submit any AD-581 forms, Lump Sum Payment for Leave, on a timely basis following the departure of an employee. Please also ensure that any AD-581 forms, as well as leave audits, contain the appropriate signatures. This will ensure that the documents are processed timely, since HR is unable to process these forms without signatures.

PERFORMANCE APPRAISALS

Performance appraisals are to be completed 30 days after the performance rating cycle has ended and should be forwarded to Human Resources Operations-Minneapolis, Processing Section, for entry into the NFC database. Please forward only the summary rating to Minneapolis. Do not forward any attachments such as the performance standards. Information on performance appraisals can be found in the following directives: APHIS Directive 4430.1 (2 level system); APHIS Directive 4430.4 (5 level system); AMS Directive 4430.1 and GIPSA Directive 4430.1

AWARDS PROCESSING

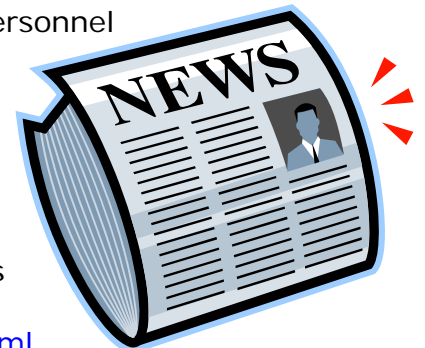
When submitting awards for an **individual** award, **separate** AD-287-2 forms **MUST** be submitted for each individual receiving an award. Please do not attach a sheet with individual names and case numbers.

If you are submitting a **Group award**, then attach a sheet of paper with the individuals' names and SSN and one case number will be used for the Group award.

Personnel Security News

Staff Developments: The HR community recently established a Personnel Security Section in a widespread effort to tighten and improve the background investigation and security clearance process, and to oversee the Department's implementation of HSPD-12 (note separate article below). This section consists of: Dru Dukart, Personnel Security Officer; Tiana Richardson, Personnel Security Specialist; and Ingrid St. James, HR Assistant (Personnel Security). For further contact information and guidance on MRP's background investigation process, visit our website at:

<http://www.aphis.usda.gov/mrpbs/classification/security/index.html>



e-QIP Update: The Electronic Questionnaire for Investigation Processing (e-QIP) is now operational for MRP employees submitting applications for background investigations and security clearances. e-QIP is an automated system which allows applicants to electronically enter, update, and transmit personal data over a secure internet connection. Currently, only employees/applicants required to complete the SF-85P (Public Trust) and SF-86 (National Security) questionnaires are able to complete the form on-line, after being given access to the e-QIP site by Human Resources personnel security staff. More information on e-QIP is available on the Personnel Security web page noted above

Personal Identity Verification (PIV) Requirements and HSPD-12: As part of USDA's implementation of the Homeland Security Presidential Directive (HSPD-12), HR has put into place the policies and procedures for all Marketing and Regulatory Programs to meet the PIV requirements set forth by USDA and the Office of Management and Budget (OMB). Under HSPD-12 and Department Regulation 3120-001, MRP was required to implement this common identification standard for all employees and contractors.

This implementation process requires at a minimum a National Agency Check (NAC) background investigation on all employees. The first phase of this process (PIV-1) began October 30, 2005, and contains critical roles associated with the identity proofing, registration, and issuance process for all *new hires*. More detailed information can be found at <http://hspd12.usda.gov>.

While the process mostly affects new first time government employees, a process is being drafted to address some of the issues and concerns regarding the contractor portion of this Directive. Watch for updates in the Spring HR News Broadcast.

Program points of contact are strongly urged to download the instructions and frequently asked questions found in <http://hspd12.usda.gov/DOCUMENTS/Sponsors%20FAQ.pdf>. However they may also contact any of the Personnel Security Staff for further guidance.