



## USDA Labor-Management Relations Update (LMRU)

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### Mission

*The Mission of the USDA Office of Human Resources Management Labor Relations program is to provide expert advice and assistance to all levels of USDA staff and management, especially Labor Relations practitioners, so they are better able to meet their LR obligations while accomplishing the program goals of their Mission Areas and Offices.*

### USDA Labor Relations Practitioner Assessment – Mission Area Personnel Officers Briefed

Following the recent survey of current and former USDA labor relations practitioners to determine factors affecting recruitment and retention, an [assessment report](#) and recommendations were presented to the Human Resources Leadership Council on February 4, 2004. The report and recommendations, made on behalf of the Labor Relations Pay Equity Team (**Cheryl Dunham**-FSIS, **Noreen Joice** (FSA-KC), **Mike Stein** (FSA-DC, now at the Dept. of Commerce), and **Pete Rockx** (OHRM), focused on [survey results](#) and drew the following conclusions:

- USDA is facing a shortage of LR practitioners
- The most important factors affecting recruitment and retention are; financial recognition, alignment of jobs with career goals and professional job challenges
- Widespread perception by practitioners that grades for USDA LR positions are lower than other Federal agencies
- USDA LR practitioners understand their role and believe they contribute to agency success

Given the results and conclusions, the following recommendations were offered:

- Increase the salary of LR practitioners
- Current LR position descriptions should be reviewed, revised as necessary and classified accordingly
- Mission Area supervisors and managers should examine the survey results and address retention factors within their control (e.g. professional development)
- Mission Areas should establish succession plans to maintain LR skill levels

Prompted in part by this report, a team of Mission Area representatives representing Human Resources Directors from several Mission Areas, has been formed to develop recommendations specific to addressing pay-related issues. For a complete copy of the report: Assessment of Current and Former USDA Labor Relations Practitioners, please contact Pete Rockx, [peter.rockx@usda.gov](mailto:peter.rockx@usda.gov).

## **New Faces in New Places within USDA Labor Relations**

Welcome to the following new USDA Labor Relations staff member:

**Alana Montas** – Labor Relations Intern – Farm Service Agency-DC

## **Monthly USDA Labor Relations Teleconferences Begin**

One of the new activities resulting from the Labor Relation Pay Equity Team project has been the start up of monthly teleconferences between the Department and the Mission Area Labor Relations Officers. These calls are in addition to the quarterly USDA Labor Relations Officer (LRO) meetings that have taken place during the past several years. The calls, which are open to key LRO staffs, follow a prescribed format of:

- Updates and reminders on current events,
- Discussion of recent significant case law decisions of interest,
- Discussion of Mission Area questions/issues, and
- Sharing informational topics by Mission Areas.

Calls lasting approximately one hour, take place the second Thursday of every month at 1pm eastern time. Our call on March 11, featured a discussion of *Social Security Administration Charleston, S.C. and Association of Administrative Law Judges International Federation of Professional and Technical Engineers, AFL-CIO*, 59 FLRA No. 118 (2004), in which the Authority expanded the application of its *de minimis* standard.

## **USDA Labor Relations Strategic Plan**

Creation of a Labor Relations strategic plan is one of three Departmental labor relations action strategies targeted at meeting Goal 9 contained in the current USDA Human Capital Plan. That goal is:

*Prevent and successfully resolve employee disputes and maintain effective working relationships with labor organizations.*

In January 2004, the recommended Plan was submitted to the Assistant Secretary of Administration's office for review. Copies of the draft Plan were distributed to those attending the February LRO meeting. The strategic plan is intended to articulate how the labor relations aspects of significant cross cutting issues like competitive sourcing will be addressed at the Department level in the future.

## **Labor and Employee Relations Automated Tracking and Reporting System (LERACTRS) – Update**

Since our last issue of the *LMRU*, the LERACTRS Team has made steady progress in its efforts to prepare the program for deployment, which is slated to take place during the last quarter of '04. Funds have been secured and procurement action underway to convert the MS Access version of the application to become web-based. The plan is to place

LERACTRS on the HR dashboard to facilitate user access throughout the Department. **Richard Reyes**, HR Specialist from FSIS and primary architect of the application, has been detailed to OHRM on a part time basis to assist with the many tasks associated with quality control over the application's conversion, and other deployment-related activities. In addition, individual ER or LR staff members from Mission Areas and USDA staff offices have been designated to become points of contact to the LERACTRS Team as the project moves toward implementation. During the next several months Mission Areas are encouraged to request application demonstrations, review the draft user guide that was previously distributed, and obtain a copy of the MS Access application on disc to become familiar with the program. Mission Areas may request a demonstration or disc by contacting Richard Reyes, [Richard.Reyes@usda.gov](mailto:Richard.Reyes@usda.gov).

### **Next USDA Labor-Management Relations Training Class**

The next offering of our popular course; *Labor-Management Relations for the Human Resources Practitioner*, will take place June 7-11, 2004, in Washington, DC. The course features an overview of the Federal Service Labor Management Relations Statute and its application, as well as a mock negotiation exercise using both the traditional and interest based models. Instructors are senior USDA LR practitioners. The announcement and registration form is available on the USDA LR web site at <http://www.usda.gov/da/employ/training-development-resources.htm>

### **Joe Swerdzewski to Speak at ILRF April Meeting**

On April 15, at 1:30pm the former General Counsel of the FLRA and current CEO of the Federal Personnel Management Institute will be the featured presenter at the monthly meeting of the Interagency Labor Relations Forum (ILRF). Mr. Swerdzewski will be providing his insights on the future of the Federal labor relations program. The ILRF is a national network of Federal labor relations practitioners whose purpose is to foster dialogue of current labor relations matters and promote the professional development of its members. Monthly meetings are currently held in the cafeteria conference room in the USDA South Agriculture Building. Those interest in finding out more about the ILRF are invited to visit its web site at [www.ilrf.net](http://www.ilrf.net).

### **Still time to Register for the SFLERP Symposium**

This annual event, 31 years running, will be held May 6-7, 2004, in Arlington, VA. It provides a varied agenda of relevant topics for the labor and employee relations practitioner at a reasonable cost. For more information about the symposium and SFLERP visit their web site at [sflerp@sflerp.org](mailto:sflerp@sflerp.org).

## **Service Center Agencies (SCA) IT Convergence - Update**

For employees in Rural Development, Farm Service Agency and Natural Resources and Conservation Service, aka the Service Center Agencies (SCA), this is a big deal to *experience*. For those of you outside those agencies, this is a big deal to *observe*.

Each month as the Office of the Chief Information Officer (OCIO) and the SCA move closer to transferring the function of over 700 SCA employees to OCIO, labor relations issues have become more numerous. Over 200 of these employees are represented by labor organizations within nearly 30 different bargaining units. Currently, there is collective bargaining occurring within the SCA over procedures and arrangements of the transfer, and enough questions about representation to make your head swim. On a scale of 1-10, the FLRA says the representations issues to be resolved rate about an 8.5.

The OCIO and SCA have taken a collaborative-compliance approach to issue resolution by openly communicating with labor organizations and using pre-decisional involvement while at the same time exercising its reserved rights to make key decisions. Collective bargaining methods vary somewhat, but are largely traditional. Meetings are being planned with the FLRA and unions to discuss representations questions prior to the transfer takes place. For more information about the convergence visit the OCIO web site at [www.itconv.usda.gov/itconv](http://www.itconv.usda.gov/itconv).

## **USDA Reports on FY '03 Official Time – Get Ready for '04**

In response to what has become an annual reporting requirement from the Office of Personnel Management (OPM), in January 2004, USDA reported union officials used slightly more than 170,000 hours of official time in FY '03. This figure represents an approximate 35% increase over '03 (127,188 hours). Although much of the increase was attributed to one Mission Area that experienced an extensive amount of union activity used in conjunction with its large competitive sourcing program, several agencies within USDA also saw increases. As indicated in Ruthie Jackson's (OHRM Director) February 24, 2004, [memo](#) to Mission Area Human Resources Directors, on this subject, it's time for self-reflection and action to better manage official time usage. OPM has not yet released Governmentwide official time data for '03, but has indicated it will be requesting '04 data shortly after the end of this fiscal year. The '04 data will be reported in four different categories as indicated in Director Jackson's memo.

The USDA LMRU is issued periodically by the USDA Office of Human Resources Management s (OHRM) Program, Policy and Partnership Division as a method and means to highlight significant events occurring in the federal Labor Relations profession within the Department. It will also contain what we believe to be useful LMR information received by the USDA from other federal agencies and outside sources that may not be readily available to the Mission Area Labor Relations community. Readers are encouraged to submit questions, suggested topics and LMR news to improve the utility of the LMRU. Queries and comments should be sent to [peter.rockx@usda.gov](mailto:peter.rockx@usda.gov).