

Full Steam Ahead for USDA's Buyout Plan for FY97

3,750 Fewer of Us Here by January?

by Ron Hall, Office of Communications

USDA was given permission in its budget for FY 1997 to offer buyouts to its employees--and the Department hasn't wasted any time in putting a buyout plan into place.

In fact, virtually all USDA employees who take buyouts for FY97 are expected to be off the roles by January 1997.

According to **John Robertson**, a personnel management specialist in the Policy Analysis and Coordination Center-Human Resources Management, in September each USDA mission area was required to assess the employment ceiling for each of its respective agencies for FY97, based on such factors as budget shortfalls, workload reductions, and changes caused by streamlining.

"Based on that information and input," he advised, "Departmental employees then developed USDA's buyout plan for FY97." In the document, dated Sept. 21, 1996 and titled "Fiscal Year 1997 Buyout Plan," mission areas--and, in turn, agencies--list the number of buyouts they are offering in FY97, which is the first year of an authorized four-year buyout.

The document noted that "Use of the buyout tool in FY 1997 will help the USDA Mission Areas achieve additional reductions in a manner which is cost effective, advantageous to employees, furthers USDA's diversity objectives, and advances the public interests."

Robertson said the plan projects that approximately 3,750 employees will take buyouts during FY97--contributing to an anticipated Departmentwide reduction in staffing of 4,856 employees.

This compares to 5,687 buyouts taken by employees during USDA's earlier buyout time frame of March 31, 1994 to March 31, 1995, as well as an additional 512 "delayed separation buyouts," in which an employee signed up for a buyout during those 1994-95 dates but could delay his/her departure until not later than March 31, 1997. He said that no additional "delayed separation buyouts" are being authorized in this latest buyout plan.

The Aug.-Sept. 1995 issue of the USDA News carried a story on a demographic and agency-by-agency profile of the Department's 5,687 earlier buyouts.

PACC computer specialist **Ed McLaughlin** noted that as of Oct. 29, USDA's work force consisted of 109,500 full-time, part-time, and temporary employees.

According to the plan, the individual buyout projections--for FY97 only--by mission area, and in turn by agency, are as follows:

In the Farm and Foreign Agricultural Services mission area, the Farm Service Agency is offering up to 1,108 buyouts. The Foreign Agricultural Service is not offering any buyouts.

The Rural Development mission area is offering up to 653 buyouts.

The Food, Nutrition, and Consumer Services mission area is not offering any buyouts.

In the Natural Resources and Environment mission area, the Natural Resources Conservation Service is offering up to 300 buyouts. The Forest Service is offering up to 1,500 buyouts.

The Food Safety mission area is offering buyouts to up to 90 employees of the Food Safety and Inspection Service.

In the Research, Education, and Economics mission area, the Economic Research Service is offering up to 42 buyouts. Its other agencies--the Agricultural Research Service, the Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service, and the National Agricultural Statistics Service--are not offering buyouts.

In the Marketing and Regulatory Programs mission area--consisting of the Agricultural Marketing Service, the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, and the Grain Inspection, Packers and Stockyards Administration--no agencies are offering buyouts.

The Departmental Administration mission area is offering up to 56 buyouts within the following agencies: the Departmental Administration Management Services, PACC-Information Resources Management, PACC-HRM, and PACC-Procurement and Property Management. PACC-Civil Rights and the Office of Operations are not offering buyouts.

The Office of Communications is offering up to 4 buyouts. The National Appeals Division is also offering up to 4 buyouts. No other agencies are planning to offer buyouts for FY97, according to the plan.

USDA's buyout plan does note that APHIS, CSREES, the Departmental Administration mission area, ERS, FS, the Food and Consumer Service, FSIS, NRCS, OC, the Rural Business-Cooperative Service, the Rural Housing Service, and the Rural Utilities Service are all offering early outs during at least part of FY97.

Charles Warrick, director of the Compensation and Employment Division in PACC-HRM, said that agencies are required to lose a staff year for each employee who takes a buyout and who thereby is paid up to \$25,000, depending on salary and time in service.

"But if those various combinations of buyouts and early outs don't reduce a mission area's employment ceiling by the targeted level for FY97," he cautioned, "then AMS, the DA mission area, FS, FSA, and the RD mission area may need to utilize reduction-in-force procedures as a last resort--when it is anticipated that involuntary separations may occur."

"However," he added, "most of those mission areas and agencies feel they'll be able to avoid involuntary separations for FY97."

"Buyouts and early outs have served the Department well in the past," Warrick affirmed, "by helping us reduce our work force to levels necessitated by streamlining initiatives and budget constraints, without impairing the Department's mission and without ultimately requiring more drastic measures such as RIFs."

"It is our every hope that buyouts and early outs will serve us in that same manner yet again." 𐄂