

USDA's Budget is the First One Approved for FY97

Plus, a Four-Year Buyout Option

by Ron Hall, Office of Communications

USDA now has the distinction of being the first federal department with a budget signed into law for FY 1997. That budget is also unique because it includes a provision for employee buyouts over a four-year period.

USDA's FY97 budget was signed into law on August 6, following its passage by Congress on August 1. It was the first and, at press time, the only FY97 appropriation--out of 13 requiring passage--that had been approved by Congress and signed into law.

Steve Dewhurst, director of the Office of Budget & Program Analysis, said that USDA's FY97 budget which was finally approved provides \$51.9 billion in budget authority for the Department--excluding the Forest Service, which is part of the "Interior and Related Agencies Appropriations Act."

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--Charles Warrick

That \$51.9 billion funding figure, the end product of a congressional conference committee effort, compared to \$51.7 billion originally passed by the House of Representatives, \$52.9 billion originally passed by the Senate, and \$56.0 billion requested by the Clinton Administration as part of its FY97 governmentwide budget proposal that it sent to Congress on March 19.

The original budget proposal for USDA called for a staffing level for FY97 of 104,568 full-time equivalent positions, or staff years. That would have represented a decrease of 885 staff years from the estimated FY96 staff year level of 105,453.

As detailed in a story in the March 1996 issue of the **USDA News**, seven USDA agencies reflected proposed increases in staff years, while eight agencies reflected proposed decreases in staff years.

However, because of the reduced funding for FY97, Dewhurst projected that the staff years for nearly all USDA agencies would be less than those originally proposed in the FY97 budget.

Of particular interest

OBPA Associate Director **Larry Wachs** noted that USDA's final budget for FY97 includes information on these items thought to be of particular interest to employees:

- It provides an additional \$1.5 million--to total \$11.8 million--for civil rights enforcement activities, which include funds to reduce the backlog of complaints alleging discrimination;
- It provides the full budget request of \$574.0 million for the Food Safety and Inspection Service;
- It limits the use of nonreimbursable details of personnel from one USDA agency to another to 30 days. This does not apply to FS personnel since, as noted earlier, that agency's funding is not part of this appropriation;
- It provides no separate, specific funding for the implementation of the Department's Service Centers across the country;
- It continues to allow USDA to use appropriated funds for incidental expenses of volunteers in work of the Department and for promotional items of nominal value relating to the Department's Volunteer Programs;
- It limits all USDA funds spent on advisory committees, task forces, panels, and commissions--except panels for negotiated rulemaking efforts and panels for the review of competitively awarded grants--to not more than \$1 million;
- It gives USDA authority--but no additional funding--to offer buyouts to employees through FY 2000.

According to **Charles Warrick**, director of the Compensation and Employment Division in the Policy Analysis and Coordination Center, USDA's buyouts will be offered on a "sliding scale," which means that buyouts taken in the first year--FY97--would be worth up to \$25,000; in FY98, up to \$20,000; in FY99, up to \$15,000; and in FY 2000, up to \$10,000.

"Agency buyout windows will generally be offered during 30 to 60 day increments," he noted. "In addition, agencies will be required to 'take one full-time equivalent reduction'--in other words, lose a staff year--for each employee who takes a buyout."

Warrick added that, as with previous buyout offerings at the Department, individual agencies will have the option to offer buyouts--or decline that option. He also noted that the Department plans to ask the Office of Personnel Management for "early-out" authority for FY97