

## More Options Can Now Be Used to Assess Performance

But No 'Arbitrary Imposition'

*by Ron Hall, Office of Communications*

So you say you don't like your agency's current program for annually assessing your performance, with its five levels of rating and its mandatory review by an official who you don't think even knows who you are?

Hey, now you may have a shot at redesigning that performance appraisal program--with your input in mind.

Secretary **Dan Glickman** sent a memorandum, titled "USDA Performance Management System" and dated June 12, 1996, to USDA's under and assistant secretaries in which he attached a six page document titled "Department of Agriculture Performance Management System." In the memo he noted that the attachment "establishes the framework within which mission areas/agencies can develop performance management programs for non-Senior Executive Service (SES) employees that are tailored to meet the needs of the organization."

Pointing out that "the purpose of performance management is to improve individual and organizational performance," Glickman added that "mission areas/agencies should focus on this goal when designing, developing, and evaluating their performance management programs."

While clarifying that "no mission area/agency is required to develop a new performance management program," he advised that "I will hold you accountable for ensuring that the performance management programs in your mission areas adhere to the principles and objectives of the [Department's Performance Management] System."

**Susan Fonte**, a personnel management specialist with the Policy Analysis and Coordination Center and manager of USDA's new Performance Management System, said it was the byproduct of a 26-person committee that established the framework within which USDA agencies could design their own performance management programs.

Its members wanted to make a distinction between "performance appraisal" and "performance management."

"The first is really a subset of the second," she said. "In other words, the performance appraisal process itself won't necessarily result in better mission accomplishment."

"Instead, performance management is the 'big picture'--which includes long-term goals as well as more short-term, measurable, quantifiable goals--and performance appraisal is a part of that big picture."

That's why, Fonte said, they tried to point out that it's not as important to spend "hours and hours wordsmithing the language in the performance standards" as it is to focus on performance management and planning, characterized by "where do you want to go, as an agency, and how do you want to get there."

"This is easier said than done," she acknowledged, "since we're all too often busy reacting to the latest short-term, rush, quick turnaround project, and don't have time to pause, reflect, and look at the big picture of how that 'rush' ties in to the overall mission."

"But if you haven't set a 'big picture' agenda, then you're apt to not use your human and monetary resources to their best advantage."

Under USDA's new Performance Management System, agencies now have the option to drop the current appraisal process, with its five levels of performance appraisal--Outstanding, Superior, Fully Successful, Marginal, and Unacceptable--and used by virtually all non-SES USDA employees since 1986.

Instead, *if* an agency does opt to change its appraisal process, it must contain a number of factors, including the following. First, it must have at least two--but no more than five--levels of measurement. Second, it must contain at least one "critical element."

Third, it must continue to include a separate critical performance element on equal opportunity/civil rights for all supervisors, as well as a requirement to incorporate performance expectations for civil rights into an existing or newly established performance element for nonsupervisory employees. The June-July 1995 issue of the **USDA News** carried a story on changes in the language of that performance element.

Fourth, upon completion of a performance assessment by a rating official, USDA's Performance Management System no longer requires that the assessment be reviewed, approved, and signed by an even higher-level reviewing official. The only exception is when an employee receives a rating of Unacceptable.

"This should help avoid the situation," Fonte explained, "in which a reviewing official, who may not have a good working knowledge--if any real knowledge at all--about an individual employee's day-to-day performance, is nonetheless required to pass judgement in writing about that employee's performance."

"This has become more common as a result of streamlining," she noted, "as organizations have flattened, with supervisory positions being eliminated--and the remaining higher-level supervisors being responsible for more units and more employees."

Fifth, there need to be provisions for the reassignment, reduction-in-grade, or removal of employees who continue to have unacceptable performance, but only after they have had an opportunity to demonstrate acceptable performance.

Sixth, rank-and-file employees should be involved in the development of an agency's performance management program. Fonte noted that examples so far have included the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service's use of focus groups to develop its program, and the use of employee surveys by the Natural Resources Conservation Service.

"Candidly, this insistence on employee input has an additional purpose," she said. "If an agency *does* change its performance management program, we don't want anyone to be able to say it was arbitrarily imposed on them, either by that agency's personnel office or by Departmental Administration."

**Charles Warrick**, director of PACC's Compensation and Employment Division, added that there is no deadline for completion of a new Performance Management System by those agencies which opt to go that route, and to date none have been submitted to PACC's Human Resources Management for approval.

"We're interpreting that," he affirmed, "as a sign that agencies are conscientiously obtaining employee input before going forward--and, when done in good faith, that's going to take some time." 𐄂