

Collective Bargaining Agreement

between

USDA Rural Development Texas

and

**American Federation of Government
Employees Local 571**

Temple, Texas

Effective Date: January 16, 2025

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Preamble

It is the intent and purpose of the parties to:

Promote and improve the efficient and effective administration of programs by USDA, Rural Development Texas.

Improve the working conditions of employees within the meaning of the Federal Service Labor-Management Relations Statute ("the Statute"), Chapter 71, Title 5 of the U. S. Code, as amended, and 5 U.S.C. 5596, "The Back Pay Act", as amended.

Establish and foster a basic understanding of personnel policies, procedures and practices, and matters affecting the conditions of employment; and,

Provide a means for amicable discussion and adjustment of matters of mutual interest at USDA Rural Development - Texas.

Article 1: General Provisions

1.1 Parties to the Agreement

The parties to this Agreement are the US Department of Agriculture, Rural Development, State of Texas (“Employer”), and the American Federation of Government Employees, AFL-CIO (“AFGE”) and its designated bargaining agent, American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE) Local 571 (“Union” or “AFGE 571”).

1.2 Recognition

The Employer recognizes that the Union is the exclusive representative of all employees in the unit described in Section 1.3 below.

1.3 Bargaining Unit Coverage

The appropriate unit of employees covered by this Agreement is described by the FLRA “Certification of Representative” issued August 7, 2023, in Case No. WA-RP-21-0038 and WA-RP-22-0024 or as amended by the FLRA in any future certifications:

Included: All professional and nonprofessional employees of Rural Development, U.S. Department of Agriculture, in the State of Texas.

Excluded: All nonprofessional employees of the National Office, Rural Housing Service: management officials; supervisors; and employees described in 5 U.S.C. 7112(b)(2)(3)(4)(6) & (7).

Article 2: Provisions of Law and Regulations

2.1 Governing Directives

In the administration of all matters covered by this Agreement, management officials and employees are governed by existing or future laws and regulations of appropriate authorities, by existing government-wide regulations set forth, and by existing published Department and Employer rules and regulations, consistent with provisions of 5 USC Chapter 71. The Statute and Departmental Directives shall be the basis of resolving any issues not addressed by this Agreement.

2.2 Effect of this Agreement on Previous Agreement, Existing Department/Agency Policies and Practices

A. Terms and conditions of this Agreement supersede conflicting past practices and previously negotiated agreements between the Union and Employer. When it becomes effective, this Agreement shall supersede and cancel all previous formal and informal agreements, excluding any mutually agreed upon past practices, and shall serve as the sole Agreement between the parties

B. USDA or Agency policies that exist at the time this Agreement becomes effective shall continue in effect unless otherwise stated in this Agreement or changed as permitted by Article 20.

2.3 Application of this Agreement to Other Agreements Between the Parties

The provisions of this Agreement shall apply to all supplemental, implementing and subsidiary agreements between the parties to the extent such other agreements do not amend this Agreement unless such an amendment is agreed to by both parties.

2.4 Meaning of “Days” in this Agreement

Days are calendar days unless otherwise noted.

Article 3: Rights of Employees, Union and Employer

3.1 Employer Rights

(a) Subject to subsection (b) of this section, nothing in this chapter shall affect the authority of any management official of any agency--

- (1) to determine the mission, budget, organization, number of employees, and internal security practices of the agency; and
- (2) in accordance with applicable laws--
 - (A) to hire, assign, direct, layoff, and retain employees in the agency, or to suspend, remove, reduce in grade or pay, or take other disciplinary action against such employees;
 - (B) to assign work, to make determinations with respect to contracting out, and to determine the personnel by which agency operations shall be conducted;
 - (C) with respect to filling positions, to make selections for appointments from--
 - (i) among properly ranked and certified candidates for promotion; or
 - (ii) any other appropriate source; and
 - (D) to take whatever actions may be necessary to carry out the agency mission during emergencies.

(b) Nothing in this section shall preclude any agency and any labor organization from negotiating--

- (1) at the election of the agency, on the numbers, types, and grades of employees or positions assigned to any organizational subdivision, work project, or tour of duty, or on the technology, methods, and means of performing work;
- (2) procedures which management officials of the agency will observe in exercising any authority under 7106(a) of the statute; or
- (3) appropriate arrangements for employees adversely affected by the exercise of any authority under 7106(a) of the statute by such management officials.

3.2 Union Rights and Duties

The Union has the right to negotiate collective bargaining agreements covering all employees in the Unit. The Union is responsible for representing the interests of all Employees in the Unit it represents without discrimination and without regard to labor organization membership.

The Union shall be given the opportunity to be represented at:

1. any formal discussion between one or more representatives of the Employer and one or more Employees in the Unit or their representatives concerning any grievance or any personnel policy or practices or other general condition of employment; or

2. any examination of an Employee in the Unit by a representative of the Employer in connection with an investigation if:

- a. the Employee reasonably believes that the examination may result in disciplinary action against the Employee; and
- b. the Employee requests representation.

The Employer and the Union shall annually inform its Employees of their rights under paragraph 2 of this subsection.

3.3 Employees' Rights and Responsibilities

A. Participation: Each Employee shall have the right to form, join, or assist any labor organization, or to refrain from any such activity, freely, and without fear of penalty or reprisal, and each Employee shall be protected in the exercise of such right:

1. to act for a labor organization in the capacity of a representative and the right, in that capacity, to present the views of the labor organization to heads of agencies and other officials of the Executive Branch of the Government, the Congress, or other appropriate authorities; and
2. to engage in collective bargaining with respect to conditions of employment through representatives chosen by Employees under 5 U.S.C. 71.

B. Rules and Policies. The Agency shall make available the rules, regulations and policies under which employees are obligated to work. It will periodically remind employees of these policies either via email, web-based training, or other cost-effective means.

C. Employee Appearance

1. While on duty, employees will dress in a professional manner conducive to safety and consistent with the environment in which they work. Employees' attire will be in good repair and will not be inconsistent with or distracting from the business purposes of the office environment.
2. The following are some examples of clothing that would be considered appropriate: clean shoes, suits, dress pants, trouser-like jeans in a dark wash, polo-shirts, dress shirts, skirts, dresses, blouses, and blazers. The following are some examples of clothing that would be considered inappropriate: flip-flops, tank tops, low-cut blouses, shirts or t-shirts with objectionable or offensive slogans, and faded pants.
3. Employees may be requested to dress in a more formal manner when there are visitors in the workplace. Employees will be provided prior notice regarding such visits.
4. Employees representing the Agency at a meeting or conference, making a formal presentation, or delivering formal training should dress in a more formal manner, as appropriate for the occasion.

3.4 Employee Orientation

The Employer shall provide each new Bargaining Unit Employee (new hires, merit promotions and lateral transfers) with an electronic copy of:

1. the Collective Bargaining Agreement,

2. any Union/Employer-wide supplemental agreement(s),
3. Union-provided and Employer-approved cover letter which includes a listing of Union Stewards and Officers.

Article 4: Probationary, Part-Time and Temporary Employees

All such employees of the bargaining unit shall be covered by the terms of this Agreement to the extent consistent with applicable laws and regulations.

Article 5: Negotiated Grievance Procedure

5.1 Common Goal

It is the intent of the Employer and Union to have open discussions about disagreements in the workplace, to treat such matters seriously, and to cooperate in the spirit of mutual problem-solving to resolve disputes. Since grievances often arise from misunderstandings that can be settled promptly and satisfactorily on an informal basis, the Employer and Union shall encourage potential grievants to discuss their complaints with the responsible management or Union officials at the lowest level before filing a written grievance. The Union, if requested by the employee, has the right to participate either personally or telephonically in such discussions with management officials. However, informal efforts may not lead to resolution.

[NOTE: In the event the prohibitions of the E.O. 13839, "Promoting Accountability and Streamlining Removal Procedures Consistent with Merit System Principles" (May 25, 2018) are no longer in effect, the Union shall have the right during the term of this Agreement to reopen and renegotiate this Article.]

A. For purposes of this Agreement, a grievance means any complaint as defined in 5 U.S.C. 7103(a)(9) of the Statute i.e., a grievance means any complaint:

1. By any employee concerning any matter relating to the employment of the employee;
2. By the Union concerning any matter relating to the employment of any employee;
3. By any employee, the Union or the Employer concerning:
 - a. The effect or interpretation or claim of breach of a collective bargaining agreement;
 - b. Any claimed violation, misinterpretation, or misapplication of any law, rule, or regulation affecting conditions of employment.

B. This procedure shall be the exclusive procedure for resolving complaints except it shall not include a grievance concerning:

1. any claimed violation relating to prohibited political activities; retirement, life or health insurance;
2. suspension or removal for National Security reasons;
3. an examination, certificate, or appointment;
4. the classification of any position which does not result in the reduction in grade or pay of any employee;
5. any and all complaints concerning conditions of employment of non- bargaining unit positions.
6. any matter that may be raised under a statutory appeal procedure.
7. the issuance, or non-issuance, of an award of any nature.
8. the assignment of ratings of record

C. Complaints concerning an alleged prohibited personnel practice under 5 U.S.C. §2302(b)(1) subject to the jurisdiction of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, or concerning a matter covered

by 5 U.S.C. §4303 and §7512 subject to the jurisdiction of the Merit Systems Protection Board shall be appealed under the respective appropriate statutory procedures. The Statute shall be the basis of resolving any issues not addressed by this Agreement.

5.2 Representation

Employee(s) utilizing the Negotiated Grievance Procedure shall have the right to be represented and/or advised by the Union. In addition, an employee and or group of employees have the right to present or process a grievance under this procedure on their own behalf. In such cases, the Union shall be afforded the opportunity to participate in the meeting between the Employer and the grievant(s) relating to the grievance filed.

Time Limits: Time limits specified in this Article may be modified by mutual agreement of both parties. Failure of the grieving party to comply with time limits shall result in abandonment of the grievance. Failure of the party against which a grievance was filed to comply with time limits shall allow the grieving party to advance the grievance to the next step of the process.

5.3 Process

The following procedures are established for the resolution of grievances:

A. Employee Grievances: An employee requesting representation by the Union shall complete and submit a written request to the Union President with a copy to the Employer (usually his/her immediate supervisor).

Step 1

An employee or the Union shall file a written grievance within fifteen (15) days after receipt of the notice of action, occurrence of the incident or knowledge of the incident (whichever occurs first).

At a minimum, the grievance shall contain:

The grievant(s) name, duty station, and telephone number;

The specific nature of the grievance, including the identification of any provisions of the Labor-Management Agreement alleged to have been violated, the provisions of any law, rule, and/or regulation affecting conditions of employment alleged to be violated;

The remedial action desired.

It shall be filed at the level of management that initiated the action which resulted in the grievance. A copy of all grievances must be provided to the Union Representative or designee and Employer Representative or designee simultaneously with the filing of the grievance. If the grievance is filed at a higher level than appropriate, the receiving office shall return the grievance to the employee with instructions as to the level at which it should be filed. The employee must then re-file the grievance within seven (7) days. To protect the rights of individuals and the integrity of the grievance process, individual grievance issues are to remain strictly confidential between the parties involved. Within fifteen (15) days of receipt of a properly filed written grievance, the supervisor or other management official shall review the matter being grieved and shall schedule and hold a meeting with the grievant to discuss the issues. A written response granting or denying the remedy requested shall be issued within fifteen (15) days of the meeting.

Step 2

If the grievant or the Union is not satisfied with the Step 1 response, the grievance may be submitted to the State Director. The grievance must be presented in writing by the employee and/or designated representative to the State Director or his/her designee within ten (10) days after the decision rendered at the Step One. Upon request of the Union, the State Director or designee shall meet with the employee and/or the representative within fifteen (15) days of receipt of the grievance. If the issue is not resolved at the meeting, a final decision shall be issued in writing within twenty (20) days of the meeting. If the grievant is dissatisfied with the reply, the grievance may be submitted to arbitration by the Union.

B. Employer and Union Grievances

When the Employer or the Union decides to file a grievance, it shall do so by filing the grievance in writing directly with the other party for resolution within thirty (30) days of the date that the Employer or the Union became aware or should have become aware of the act or occurrence or anytime if the act or occurrence is of a continuing nature. The submission of Union grievances shall be through the State Director or designee. The submission of Employer grievances shall be through the Union President or designee. As a minimum, the grievance shall indicate the specific nature of the grievance and the remedy desired and, where appropriate, the article(s) and section(s) of the agreement involved and any law, rule or regulation violated. The parties shall meet within twenty-one (21) days of receipt of the grievance and attempt to resolve the grievance. If the matter is not resolved at this meeting, a written decision shall be issued to the grievant within twenty-one (21) days of the close of the meeting.

If the grievant is dissatisfied with the reply, the grievant may submit the grievance to arbitration.

5.4 Alternative Dispute Resolution

If both parties agree, the matter may be referred to an Alternative Dispute Resolution procedure, as outlined in Article 30 for possible resolution. The terms and timeframes for alternative resolution shall be jointly determined at the time the matter is referred.

5.5 Mediation

Because mediation using the services of disinterested third-parties to assist in negotiating mutually acceptable resolutions may be an efficient, effective and economical method of resolving disputes:

A. Either party may request mediation within ten (10) days of the final written response by the Employer as to an employee or Union-initiated grievance or by the Union as to a grievance initiated by the Employer.

B. Such mediation shall be completed within thirty (30) days of the timely request. However, the parties may extend this time limit by mutual agreement. A party's request for mediation shall halt temporarily the running of time limits for processing that grievance. If a time limit is not extended and the grievance is not resolved, the running of the time limit resumes on the thirty-first (31st) day.

C. Mediation shall occur only when FMCS or other mutually agreeable low-cost/no- cost mediators are available.

Article 6: Arbitration

6.1 Advancing a Grievance to Arbitration

Any grievance that is not satisfactorily settled under the informal and formal procedures shall be subject to binding arbitration which may be invoked by either the Union or the Employer within fifteen (15) days of the formal decision or the conclusion of ADR.

6.2 The Cost of Arbitration

The expenses of the Arbitrator and any other arrangements for the proceeding as a whole (e.g., rental of a hearing room) shall be borne equally by the Union and the Employer. If either party requests a transcript, that party shall be responsible for the cost of the transcript.

6.3 Jointly Requesting a Panel of Arbitrators

The moving party shall prepare one (1) form for the joint request to the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service ("FMCS") to furnish the parties a list of seven (7) impartial persons qualified to act as arbitrators who practice in Texas. An information copy of the request shall be sent to the other party's primary point of contact (Union President or designee and Employer Representative or designee). The Union and Employer shall equally bear the cost of the FMCS list. Prior to selecting an arbitrator, either party may request a new list, at their expense.

6.4 Selecting an Arbitrator

The two primary points of contact ("POCs") shall agree on an arbitrator within twenty- one (21) days after receipt of the list from FMCS. On the first occasion when the parties cannot agree on an arbitrator, the POC for the moving party shall strike a name from the list of arbitrators first, after which the POC for the other party shall strike a name. The POCs shall continue striking names until only one name remains, and that individual shall be the duly selected Arbitrator. For subsequent grievances where the parties cannot agree upon an arbitrator, the parties shall alternate striking a name from the list of arbitrators first.

6.5 Identifying the Issue(s) to be Resolved

If the parties fail to agree on a joint submission of the issue(s) for arbitration, each shall make a separate submission and the arbitrator shall determine the issue(s) to be heard.

6.6 Arbitrator's Award Final and Binding

The arbitrator's award shall be final and binding on both parties, except either party may file exceptions to an arbitrator's award with the Federal Labor Relations Authority ("FLRA") under regulations prescribed by the Authority. If exception is taken to an award, each party shall bear its own costs.

Article 7: Hours of Work, Basic Workweek, and Alternative Work Schedules

7.1 Family Friendly Workplace

1. Purpose

- A. To establish a Family-Friendly Workplace authorizing alternative work schedules which enables the Employer to meet its mission needs while allowing employees sufficient flexibility to meet both work and family needs. The Employer benefits by improved employee effectiveness and morale while giving employees more control over their lives.
- B. In interpreting and applying this Article, the Parties shall follow the applicable laws, rules and regulations then in effect.

2. Definitions

- Official Hours - Are the hours when an office is open for business. This is normally 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. This is a basic workday for full time employees.
- Core Hours - Are the designated hours (9:00 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.) during which all full-time employees must be present during their normal tour unless on approved leave, scheduled lunch period, or the tour of duty has been changed in accordance with this Article.
- Lunch Band - Is the band of time, between the hours of 11:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. that a lunch period may be scheduled. Employees are authorized a 30 minute, 45 minute or one hour lunch period. The lunch period must start and end during this band.
- Flexible Work Schedule ("FWS") - A work schedule that:
 1. In the case of a full-time employee, has an 80-hour biweekly basic work requirement that allows an employee to determine their own schedule within the limits set by the Employer; or
 2. In the case of a part-time employee, has a biweekly basic work requirement of less than 80 hours that allows an employee to determine their own schedule within the limits set by the Employer.
 3. Is established between the hours of 6:30 a.m. to 12:00 a.m. However, on a regular basis the employee's scheduled workday must be completed by 6:00 p.m.
- Maxiflex Schedule - A type of FWS that contains core hours on 10 or fewer workdays in the biweekly pay period and in which a full-time employee has a basic work requirement of 80 hours for the biweekly pay period. Some employees shall not be allowed to participate fully in this plan because of unique position requirements or office coverage. Maxiflex schedule may be used to emulate a Compressed Work Schedule; however, if this emulation is detrimental to the Agency's mission, the employee will be advised of this detriment and will cease utilizing Maxiflex to emulate a Compressed Work Schedule.
- Flexitour Schedule - A type of FWS in which an employee is allowed to select starting and stopping times within the flexible hours. Employees must work 8 hours a day, 5 days a week. This schedule differs from the normal eight-hour tour in that the scheduled arrival and departure times need not coincide with the basic eight-hour workday.
- Compressed Work Schedule ("CWS") - Is always a fixed schedule.

1. In the case of a full-time employee, an 80-hour biweekly basic work requirement that is scheduled by an Employer for less than 10 workdays; This is typically 5 days in one week of the pay period and four weeks in the other. Employees work nine hours per day for eight days and eight hours for one day, excluding any scheduled lunch period and
2. In the case of a part-time employee, a basic work requirement of less than 80 hours that is scheduled by an Employer for less than 10 workdays and that may require an employee to work more than 8 hours a day.

- Credit Hours - Those hours within an FWS that an employee elects to work in excess of their basic work requirement to vary the length of a workweek or workday. Although credit hours are worked voluntarily, and are not ordered overtime, they are to be worked with the concurrence of the Employer (usually the employee's supervisor). Employees on CWS are not eligible to earn credit hours. Credit hours earned and used must be approved in advance by the supervisor. Credit hours may only be earned between 6:30 a.m. and 6:00 p.m.
- Operating Hours – The operating hours are the specific hours of the Agency in which employees may begin or end the workday. Those hours are from 6:30 a.m. until 6 p.m. daily.

3. Policy

- A. This policy is to implement alternative work schedules including Maxiflex, flexitour and a fixed work schedule (Compressed). These options provide a full range of work schedules for employees.
- B. Official hours are the hours when an office is open for business. This is normally 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Core hours are the designated hours (9:00 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.) during which all full-time employees must be present during their normal tour unless on approved leave, scheduled lunch period, or the tour of duty has been changed in accordance with paragraph 3(b)(1)(c) of this section. A lunch period of 30, 45, or 60, etc., minutes is requested by the employee and approved by the Employer (usually the employee's supervisor).

1. Maxiflex Schedule

- a. The Employer (usually the employee's immediate supervisor), is responsible for determining whether conditions such as office coverage may restrict certain positions from Maxiflex participation.
- b. Employees select a starting time each day, e.g., 8:00 a.m. (so that the Employer may know generally when to expect the employee). However, the employee may change the starting times daily within the established flexible hours of 6:30 a.m. to 9:00 a.m. Supervisors may require that an employee provide advance notice when the employee will not be arriving within 30 minutes of their anticipated arrival time. The employee's regularly scheduled number of hours for that day must be completed by 6:00 p.m. Full-time employees must schedule a minimum of 5 1/2 hours and a maximum of 10 hours (exclusive of lunch period) for each scheduled workday.
- c. The employee is responsible for choosing a biweekly schedule and submitting it in writing to the Employer (usually their immediate supervisor) for approval. The Employer may change the tour of duty as necessary for the accomplishment of work and the fulfillment of the Agency's mission.. Night pay differential shall apply to hours worked after 6:00 p.m. only when the supervisor initiates the change in the work schedule.

- d. Hours an employee works under a Maxiflex schedule are to be recorded on a minute-to-minute basis. Exact arrival and departure times are to be recorded for each employee daily.
- e. Under Maxiflex, work schedules may vary. Employees may work:

Example 1:

1st week: M - 10 hours, T - 10 hours, W - 6 hours, Th - 10 hours, F - 8 hours;
 2nd week: M - 7 hours, T - 7 hours, W - 7 hours, Th - 7 hours, F - 8 hours.

Example 2: A traditional 8-hour, 5-day workweek.

Example 3:

1st week: M-F - 9 hours;
 2nd week: M-W - 9 hours, Th - 8 hours.

While this appears to be a 5/4-9 CWS, the employee is under Maxiflex and is eligible to earn credit hours. In addition, the holiday pay the employee earns is eight (8) hours.

- f. Employees may not work more than twelve (12) hours in a day (exclusive of lunch period). This includes regular tour of duty and credit hours.
- g. Employees may request to change their work schedule quarterly. Those quarters are:
 - 1. January, February, March
 - 2. April, May, June
 - 3. July, August, September
 - 4. October, November, December
- 2. Flexitour Schedule
 - a. The employee is responsible for choosing a biweekly schedule within the hours of 6:30 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. and submitting it in writing to the Employer (usually the employee's immediate supervisor) for approval. The requested hours are limited to an 8-hour, 5-day workweek.
 - b. Employees shall be allowed to request a change in Flexitour hours quarterly as defined by the quarters above.
 - c. Employees on Flexitour are eligible to earn credit hours.
- 3. Compressed Work Schedule ("CWS")
 - a. CWSs are arranged to enable employees to fulfill their basic work requirements in less than 10 days during the biweekly pay period.
 - b. CWSs authorized is the 5/4-9 compressed plan.
 - c. There are no provisions for employee flexibility in reporting time or quitting time under CWS.

- d. There is no legal authority for credit hours under CWS.
 - e. Employees shall be allowed to request a change in CWS quarterly as defined by the quarters above
 - f. A full-time employee on a CWS who is relieved or prevented from working on a day designated as a holiday (or an "in lieu of" holiday) is entitled to their rate of basic pay for the number of hours of the CWS on that day.
 - g. If a part-time employee on a CWS is relieved or prevented from working on a day designated as a holiday, he/she is entitled to their rate of basic pay for the number of hours of the CWS on that day. Part-time employees do not receive an "in lieu of" holiday.
 - h. Determining "in lieu of" holiday. Full-time employees on a CWS who are not scheduled to work on a holiday receive an "in lieu of" holiday on the preceding workday, unless the holiday falls on a Sunday non-workday, in which case the workday immediately following the Sunday holiday is the in-lieu of holiday.
4. Credit Hours
- a. Credit hours are worked on a voluntary basis. However, they are worked with the concurrence of the Employer (usually the employee's immediate supervisor).
 - b. Credit hours may be earned by employees on FWSs (Maxiflex or Flexitour).
 - c. Full-time employees may carry over no more than 24 credit hours from pay period to pay period.
 - d. Part-time employees are limited on a pro-rata basis and may carry over an amount of credit hours equal to one-fourth of their biweekly work requirement.
 - e. Credit hours may be earned in the following manner:
 - 15-minute increments;
 - Monday - Friday between the hours of 6:30 a.m. to 6:00 p.m.;
 - After 6:00 p.m. to 12:00 a.m. to attend night meetings with supervisory approval;
 - There is no limit on the number of credit hours that may be earned in a workday so long as the total credit hours and regular tour of duty do not exceed 12 hours (exclusive of lunch period).
 - f. Credit hours may not be earned by employees on CWS.
5. No more than one-third of a work unit's employees may be scheduled for a compressed day off at the same time. For a two-person office, no more than one-half of the work unit's employees may be scheduled for a compressed day off at the same time.
6. To resolve conflicts in schedules:
- a. The parties encourage informal resolution within the employees' work unit.

- b. The Service Computation Date (SCD) for leave purposes, as shown on SF-52, Notice of Personnel Action, shall be used to determine order of priority in choosing the schedules and days off when informal resolution is unsuccessful.
- c. A new employee coming into the work unit cannot force a change in the existing employees' work schedules.
- d. Employees are encouraged to consider days off other than Mondays and Fridays.

4. Responsibilities

a. Supervisors

1. To implement AWS in any organizational subdivision, three prerequisite criteria must be met. These criteria are:
 - a. Service to the public cannot diminish
 - b. Productivity cannot diminish
 - c. Cost of operations must not substantially increase.
2. Approve or disapprove the biweekly work schedule submitted by the employee. When a supervisor cannot honor an employee's request because of office coverage, the supervisor shall discuss with the employee(s) involved to reach a mutually acceptable alternative schedule. If acceptable compromise cannot be reached at that time, the supervisor shall make a final determination concerning the work schedule.
3. After discussion with the employee, the supervisor may make changes to an employee's work schedule to assure adequate coverage or because of workload, training needs, attendance at meetings, travel, an opportunity to improve plan, an operational exigency, etc. These changes may be subject to premium pay per 5 CFR 610.121(b)(3).

b. Employees

1. Submit a biweekly work schedule in writing to their supervisor for approval. This schedule remains in effect until the employee submits and receives approval for a new schedule. Changes should be no more frequent than quarterly (Jan-Mar, Apr-Jun, etc.) unless an unforeseen life event occurs. Changes must be submitted 2 pay periods before the beginning of the quarter.
2. Choose a 30, 45, or 60, etc., minute lunch period. This choice should be communicated to the supervisor in writing. On occasion, with supervisory approval, employees on a Maxiflex work schedule may expand their lunch period within the established lunch band and make it up at the end of the day without a charge to leave.
3. Observe designated duty hours and must be punctual in reporting for work and returning from lunch.
4. When an employee travels to a site for 3 days or more which cannot accommodate the employees alternative work schedule, the employee will temporarily revert back to an eight-hour day for the complete pay-period.

7.2 Breaks

1. Employees are authorized two (2) fifteen (15) minute breaks each day. The break periods shall be taken in the morning and the afternoon. Breaks cannot be added to arrival times, lunch periods, or closing time and cannot be carried over and accumulated.
2. The fifteen (15) minute break in each part of the day may be taken at one time or in shorter intervals but total time in each part of the day shall not exceed fifteen (15) minutes.
3. The Employee will remain in close proximity (within 3 miles) to the jobsite during breaks. Employer business shall, from time to time, interrupt breaks, with phone calls and walk in customers. Employees shall, in such cases, shorten breaks but still be authorized the fifteen (15) minutes each morning and afternoon.
4. Upon approval from their supervisor, Employees may participate in on-site wellness/exercise activities on duty time by extending one of their regular fifteen (15) minute break periods to twenty (20) minutes, as long as they remain available for work if needed. An employee who extends one of their regular fifteen (15) minute breaks for a wellness/exercise activity shall not take more than thirty (30) minutes of break during the day.
5. If it sees possible evidence of abuse of the break period (exceeding the fifteen (15) minutes per morning or afternoon, or 20 minutes as used in section 4 above), the Employer may require the employee to check in and to check out of the break periods.

7.3 Credit Hours

Credit hours provide flexibility for bargaining unit employees to meet Employer mission area needs, without increasing overtime costs. Credit hours are also a key element in meeting the Family Friendly objectives embedded in the RD Instruction 2051-F.

Credit Hours Worked

1. Those hours in excess of the employee's daily tour of duty which are performed at the employee's option with concurrence of the Employer.
2. Request to Work Credit Hours
 - a. Normally, the employee shall request to work credit hour(s) prior to the date the employee intends to work the credit hour(s) by submitting this request to the Employer (usually his or her immediate supervisor). In the supervisor's absence, the request shall be submitted to the next level supervisor. The Employer shall normally approve or deny the request before the employee works the credit hours. Requests and approvals can be verbal or written.
 - b. In the case of an employee who is on a flexible work schedule and, without specific prior supervisory approval, spends time to perform work within the Employer's tour of duty but outside the employee's schedule, the Employer shall count the time for credit hours under the following conditions:
 1. within two (2) workdays of the occurrence, the employee submits to the Employer (usually through his or her immediate supervisor) a memorandum that justifies counting the time by showing:
 - i. performing the work at that time was reasonably necessary, and

- ii. the employee attempted to obtain supervisory approval but was unsuccessful because no supervisor was reasonably available; and
 2. the supervisor concurs by signing the memorandum. Retroactive approval of credit hours may be justified for any individual employee no more than once per pay period except when the employee can demonstrate exceptional circumstances.
3. Use of Credit Hours

Credit hour leave requests shall be approved/disapproved in accordance with RD Instruction 2066-A, "Leave", dated February 23, 1990, and any of these regulations subsequent updates.

Article 8: Overtime and Compensatory Time

8.1 General

Overtime and compensatory time shall be administered in accordance with the applicable law and/or regulation that applies to the employee, i.e. RD Instruction 2051- H; DPM regulation Chapter 550, Sub-chapter 1, Premium Pay; and the appropriate overtime provisions of 5 CFR 532-550-551.

Time under this article shall be earned or used in increments of fifteen (15) minutes. The provisions for fractional hours are contained in RD Instruction 2051-H.

The Employer determines the need for, approves, and assigns all overtime work, and also determines the employee qualifications required to perform such work.

8.2 Procedure for Assignment of Overtime

The Employer shall give an employee as much advance notice as possible in making overtime assignments, but the parties acknowledge that emergencies, operational exigencies, and unanticipated workload requirements may result in the Employer's inability to give advance notice. However, employees shall be allowed reasonable time under the circumstances to make arrangements necessary to minimize personal hardship.

8.3 Compensatory Time

Compensatory time is considered overtime. All rules and procedures established in this article that govern the assignment and accrual of overtime are applicable to compensatory time, except as noted herein.

Employees who are "nonexempt" under the Fair Labor Standards Act ("FLSA") may be allowed to earn compensatory time rather than paid overtime provided that the employee requests, in writing, at the time overtime is requested/assigned.

Compensatory time for FLSA nonexempt employees is granted at the discretion of the Employer; however, the Employer may not require that the employee earn compensatory time in lieu of paid overtime.

The use of compensatory time off shall be governed by the applicable provisions of 5 CFR Parts 550 and 551, and applicable USDA and Rural Development directives.

Compensatory time shall be used prior to annual leave unless in a year when annual leave is subject to forfeiture.

8.4 Compensatory Time Off Travel

The administration of compensatory time off for travel shall be governed by the provisions of 5 CFR Part 550 and applicable USDA and Rural Development directives.

Article 9: Leave

The Agency shall continue to apply to bargaining unit employees:

1. the provisions of the RD Instruction 2066-A, "Leave";
2. the provisions of the current and any successor RD Instruction 2051-F, "Hours of Duty";
3. the statutory obligations of the Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993 ("FMLA") as it has been or may be amended; and
4. the statutory obligations of the Family Friendly Leave Act which became effective December 2, 1994, as it has been or may be amended.

Article 10: Promotion and Bargaining Unit Vacancies

The principle of merit promotion is to ensure that employees are given full and fair consideration for advancement and to ensure selection from among the best-qualified candidates. The Employer recognizes the value of promoting from within and in creating promotion opportunity for Rural Development Employees. When filling bargaining unit positions the Employer shall follow USDA and RD policies, applicable laws, rules, and regulations then in effect, and the following additions.

10.1 General Provisions

Merit Promotion Panels may be used for all merit promotion positions filled. Should the Agency opt to utilize Merit Promotion Panels, those panels will be in accordance to USDA DR 4030-335-002. The employer will notify the union if the panel will be convened.

10.2 Lateral Reassignment or Change to Lower Grade

A bargaining unit employee may request reassignment without paid relocation expenses to a known vacant position of equivalent grade or lower. Bargaining unit employees shall be given priority consideration for a lateral transfer in accordance with applicable laws and regulations.

10.3 Non-Selection

Non-selectees may solicit from the selecting official information regarding the reason for their non-selection and how to improve the likelihood of being chosen in the future.

10.4 Resolution of Disputes

A grievance may be filed under the Negotiated Grievance Procedure of the Collective Bargaining Agreement when there is an alleged violation of relevant Merit Promotion law, rule, regulation, or the provisions of this Article.

10.5 Career Ladder Positions

The Employer (usually the immediate supervisor of the employee) and employees in career ladder positions are jointly responsible for developing a plan for the employee to attain the full performance level of the position. If the employee is not progressing satisfactorily, it is the responsibility of the Employer to counsel the employee, and the employee should take steps to correct any deficiencies.

An employee shall be eligible for promotion to the next higher grade in the career ladder beginning with the first pay period after 52 weeks or whatever lesser time period may be applicable, provided:

1. Applicable time in grade, qualification, quality of experience requirements, and other appropriate statutory and administrative requirements have been met; and
2. A rating or progress review of the employee's overall performance for the time in grade is satisfactory; and
3. The Employer determines that the employee is capable of performing the higher graded duties.

Pursuant to applicable regulations, an employee may not advance on the career ladder for his or her position for failing to satisfy the previously-mentioned eligibility requirements or because the work available at the next higher grade in the position is insufficient.

10.6 Noncompetitive Promotion

When the servicing personnel office determines that there has been an accretion of duties and responsibilities that warrants an increase in grade, the Employer shall notify the employee, supervisor, and Union representative and may promote the employee without competition if the employee is deemed qualified or may reassign the higher graded duties.

10.7 Temporary Promotions

In accordance with 5 CFR 335.103, the Employer shall temporarily promote employees detailed to higher graded duties for more than sixty (60) calendar days.

Selections for temporary promotions of 120 days or less shall normally be made from among well-qualified employees in accordance with 5 CFR 335.103. Where practicable, such promotions may be rotated among well-qualified employees.

Article 11: Training

Training shall be in accordance with RD Instruction 2057-A unless this contract provides otherwise.

11.1 Training and Development

The Employer and the Union agree that the training and development of employees within the unit is a matter of primary importance to the parties. The Employer shall make a reasonable effort to provide appropriate training and development for employees. The Employer and the Union also recognize that employees are individually responsible for applying reasonable effort, time, and initiative to increase their capabilities through self-development and training.

The Employer shall remind employees annually to include training requests in their Individual Development Plans ("IDPs").

11.2 Selection for Training

The Employer shall nominate employees for training and approve such nominations based on the employee's position, or IDP, or other criteria.

11.3 Types of Training Provided

Subject to the Employer's determination of its needs and the availability of funding, the types of training provided can include, but are not limited to, the following:

1. Job-related training is any type of training relating directly to the employee's current job duties. When the Employer determines that training directly related to those duties is necessary, the Employer shall send that employee to the appropriate training. Duty time shall be approved for job-related training, when it is scheduled during the employee's basic workweek.

When job-related training is approved, the Employer shall pay costs of tuition and required textbooks and other expenses as appropriate, and shall pay travel costs, subject to travel regulations and fiscal considerations. If travel funds are not authorized, and the training would otherwise be approved, the employee shall be notified and given the option of attending the training without travel reimbursement and/or expense reimbursement.

2. The Employer shall consider employee-initiated requests which would result in better organizational or individual performance. The Employer may approve requests to use administrative leave, annual leave, compensatory time, credit hours or leave without pay for training which is not directly job-related.
3. Each employee shall develop their IDP and an appropriate Employer designee (usually the employee's immediate supervisor) shall review it at least annually. IDPs shall be reasonable and achievable.

Article 12: Equal Employment Opportunity

12.1 Responsibilities

The Employer and the Union agree to: cooperate in providing equal opportunity in employment of all persons; prohibit discrimination because of race, color, religion, sex (including pregnancy and gender identity), national origin, age (as defined by the Age Discrimination in Employment Act of 1967, as amended), disability, genetic information (including family medical history), marital status, political affiliation, sexual orientation, labor organization affiliation or non-affiliation, status as a parent, or any other protected class covered by law, rule, or regulation: or retaliation for exercising rights with respect to the categories enumerated above where retaliation rights are available, and to promote the full realization of equal employment opportunity ("EEO") through a continuing affirmative action program. The Employer shall be responsible for taking necessary affirmative action with the objectives of ensuring a workplace free of discrimination based on any of the factors listed above and shall take appropriate remedial action when discrimination occurs. The parties agree that equal employment opportunity shall be administered in accordance with RD Instruction 2045-X and other applicable laws, rules and regulations.

The parties agree that the members of the Equal Employment Opportunity Advisory Committee (EEOAC) shall be appointed by the State Director or designee to serve in accordance with RD Instruction 2045-X, and shall include one member nominated by the Union to serve as its representative.

12.2 Employees Rights

Any employee who believes that he or she has been discriminated against on the grounds set forth in Section 12.1 may file a complaint under the appropriate complaint/appeals procedure.

Any employee who wishes to file or has filed a complaint shall be free from coercion, interference, and reprisal.

12.3 Representation

For complaints filed under EEO procedures, the representative may be a Union representative or an attorney, or another representative of their choice. Should a RD Union Official represent an employee in the EEO procedures, the time spent will not count as Union Time.

12.4 EEO Information

EEO Poster shall be placed on designated bulletin boards.

12.5 Statistical Summaries

Upon request, no more frequently than biannually, the Union shall be provided summary statistical data according to job series, grade level, race, sex, age, and disability data of:

1. Promotion actions
2. Awards (special and performance)
3. Disciplinary and adverse actions
4. Workforce profile
5. Training as tracked in AgLearn.

Article 13: Career Enhancement

Rural Development employees shall continue to be covered by the applicable law, rules, and regulations then in effect, pertaining to career enhancement.

The Employer and the Union support Career Enhancement as an alternative means of staffing to meet specific Employer needs and provide training, educational and job opportunities to high quality employees in single-interval series positions GS-1 through GS-9 and Wage Grade equivalent to advance to positions of different and/or greater responsibility and remuneration. Career Enhancement provides opportunities for Rural Development employees to move into skilled or paraprofessional and professional positions through a combination of on-the-job training and formal skills training as prescribed by individualized training plans. Since the program provides for an extension of career ladders beyond the normal progression of the individual employee's current career ladder, it will nearly always result in a classification series change for the employee. Because Career Enhancement assignments are highly selective in the kinds and degree of developmental experiences provided, the selection for a Career Enhancement assignment always begins with an appropriate selection.

Article 14: Health and Safety

Rural Development employees shall continue to be covered by the provisions of RD Instruction 2069-A dated 9/30/92, and RD Instruction 2069-B, "Safety and Injury Compensation" dated 7/25/84. Should either of these regulations be updated, the successor regulation will become effective after notification to the Union.

14.1 General

Providing and maintaining safe and healthful working conditions for all employees is one of the Employer's highest priorities, and it agrees to do so to the extent of its authority and resources consistent with applicable law, Executive Order 12196, OSHA requirements, and other applicable health and safety codes. The Employer's State Safety Officer or designee shall encourage employees to work in a safe manner, and receive and review reports of any unhealthful, hazardous, or unsafe conditions.

14.2 Employer Action

With the assistance of the Union, the Employer shall work with all persons, entities or organizations which own and/or control workspace to which bargaining unit employees are assigned to ensure that healthy and safe working conditions are maintained and to ensure compliance with applicable laws, rules, and regulations. The Employer shall also take appropriate action to ensure that any reported hazardous or unsafe working conditions are examined and, if necessary, corrected in a timely manner.

14.3 Union Action

The Union shall encourage employees to care for and respect facilities, equipment and their own work environment. The Union shall advise the Employer promptly concerning known safety and health problems. Each bargaining unit employee has a duty and is encouraged to report any unsafe or unhealthy working conditions to their immediate supervisor as soon as they become aware of such conditions.

14.4 Unsafe or Unhealthy Working Conditions

Any employee who believes that an unsafe or unhealthy condition exists has the right to report it to their immediate supervisor. The Employer shall respond to an employee report of hazardous conditions and shall advise the appropriate Union point-of-contact immediately. It shall investigate the reported condition. It may refer the situation to:

- a. the appropriate RD or USDA office;
- b. GSA;
- c. the building manager; or
- d. other appropriate officials for further investigation

The Union shall be given an opportunity to accompany any inspector who responds on such a complaint during the inspector's physical inspection of the workplace. The Union representative shall be granted official time for this purpose separate from, and not counted as, normal Union Time. During the course of any such inspection, an employee may bring to the attention of the inspector any unsafe or unhealthy working conditions.

The Employer shall assure that no employee shall be subject to restraint, interference, coercion, discrimination or reprisal for filing a report of an unsafe or unhealthy working condition, or other authorized participation in any Employer occupational safety and health program activity.

14.5 Occupational Injury or Illness

Employees who become injured or ill because of the performance of their duties shall report the injury or illness to their supervisor as soon as possible. The Employer shall cooperate in promptly processing all paperwork in connection with compensation claims.

14.6 Occupant Emergency Evacuation Plan

Each building in which bargaining unit employees are headquartered shall have an Occupant Emergency Evacuation Plan. The Employer shall issue an annual reminder of the Occupant Emergency Evacuation Program Plan.

14.7 First Aid

The Employer shall provide first aid kits at RD building locations and ensure kits are maintained. All employees shall have reasonable access to these supplies.

The Employer may provide training, contingent upon availability of funds, to interested employees for cardiopulmonary resuscitation ("CPR") during duty or non-duty hours. If during duty hours, duty time shall be given to those approved for participation.

Article 15: Performance Management

15.1 Overview

- a. The Agency will administer the Performance Management program in accordance with 5 U.S.C. Chapter 43 and 5 C.F.R. Part 430.
- b. Terms used in this Article that relate to the Performance Management System, such as “appraisal,” “critical element,” or “performance rating”, will have the same meaning as in 5 C.F.R. Part 430.

15.2 Critical Elements and Performance Standards

- a. The Agency will comply with 5 C.F.R. Part 430 when making its reserved management right decision as to the number of levels of performance for each critical element, and when determining whether a rating level will have a written performance standard.
- b. Application of all performance standards shall be fair and equitable, and consistent with 5 C.F.R. Part 430.

15.3 Communications

- a. Normally within the first thirty (30) calendar days of every rating period or within thirty (30) calendar days of employment or reassignment, the supervisor will discuss the performance plan with each employee. The supervisor will present to the employee a copy of the draft performance plan, which contains the Critical Elements and performance standards.
- b. Employees are encouraged, but not required, to provide input on the plan. The supervisor will give the employee a copy of the final performance plan and ask the employee to sign and date to acknowledge receipt.
- c. During the rating period, the supervisor will discuss with and notify the employee of any changes in the employee’s Critical Elements or performance standards, annotate them in the performance plan, and provide a copy of the revised performance plan to the employee.
- d. Performance discussions:
 1. A mid-year discussion and a closeout of current appraisal period and establishment of standards for the new appraisal period discussion must take place each appraisal period.
 2. Performance discussions should occur throughout the performance appraisal period. Discussions may be initiated by the supervisor or employee and may be held one-on-one or in a work group. Employees are encouraged to seek feedback from their supervisor about their performance throughout the performance appraisal period.
 3. Performance discussions between the supervisor and the employee will be aimed at improving the work process or product and developing the employee. As appropriate, the discussion will provide the opportunity to assess accomplishments and progress and identify and resolve problems.
 4. Performance discussions are not formal discussions.

15.4 Procedures

- a. Normally within thirty (30) days of appointment, reassignment, or change in supervision, the employee will be issued a new performance plan.

- b. Employees will receive an annual performance rating for the performance appraisal period. Performance ratings are issued in writing to the employees as soon as practicable after the end of the rating period.
- c. Employees must be working under a performance plan for a minimum of ninety (90) days before a rating can be given.

15.5 Addressing Unacceptable Performance

The provisions in this Article shall not preclude the Agency from taking an action for unacceptable performance under 5 U.S.C. Chapter 75. A supervisor is not required to use the procedures in this Section or 5 U.S.C. Chapter 43 when taking an action for unacceptable performance.

- a. At any time during the rating period, if the supervisor identifies that an employee's performance in one or more Critical Elements is at the Unacceptable level, the supervisor may notify the employee of the Critical Elements for which performance is unacceptable and inform the employee of the performance requirement(s) or standard(s) that must be attained in order to demonstrate acceptable performance with the issuance of a Notice of Opportunity to Demonstrate Acceptable Performance (NODAP).
- b. The NODAP must inform the employee that unless his or her performance in the Critical Element(s) at issue improves and is sustained at an acceptable level of performance, the employee may be demoted or removed from employment.
- c. The NODAP will afford the employee generally no more than 30 calendar days to demonstrate acceptable performance under the Critical Elements at issue, commensurate with the duties and responsibilities of the employee's position.
- d. During the NODAP period, the supervisor may offer assistance to the employee in improving unacceptable performance.
- e. A supervisor can issue an Unacceptable rating prior to issuing a NODAP. However, no reduction in grade or removal action will be taken under 5 C.F.R. Part 432 until the completion of the NODAP period.
- f. Once the NODAP period has ended or the supervisor determines that the opportunity period is no longer needed, the supervisor will provide the employee with a written notice of his/her determination of the employee's level of performance at that time.

15.6 Statutory Procedures Provide Exclusive Redress

Statutory procedures and appeals provide exclusive redress for alleged violations of employee rights involving appealable adverse and performance-based actions under this Article. Pursuant to 5 USC 7121(a)(2), disputes over appealable adverse and performance-based actions arising under this Article shall not be subject to the negotiated grievance and arbitration procedures.

Article 16: Adverse and Disciplinary Actions

16.1 Policy

The Employer shall determine when the need arises for disciplinary or adverse actions. Disciplinary actions and adverse actions shall be taken in accordance with applicable laws, rules, and regulations in effect at the time of the action. The specific penalty for an instance of misconduct shall be tailored to the facts and circumstances of the situation. Disciplinary and adverse actions against all employees must be based on "cause" as defined in the applicable laws and regulations.

16.2 Penalty Determination

A. In order to determine the appropriate penalty for an Employee such as a disciplinary or adverse action, the Employer shall, subject to applicable law, rule, and regulation, consider the relevant factors as determined by governing law (for example, applying the factors articulated by the Merit Systems Protection Board in *Douglas v. Veterans Administration*, 5 M.S.P.R. 280 (1981) to applicable adverse actions).

B. The Parties recognize that the use of progressive discipline is at management's sole and exclusive discretion. It is understood, however, that progressive discipline need not follow any specific sequence of disciplinary actions and that some offenses may be cause for severe action, including removal, irrespective of whether previous disciplinary or adverse actions have been taken against the offending Employee.

16.3 Admonishments/Counseling

Admonishments and counselings are not formal disciplinary actions to which the procedures in this Article apply. Admonishments and counselings, which may be oral or written, may be used when an Employee's conduct or performance is less than acceptable and it is likely that an informal action will result in improvement. Admonishments and counselings are neither grievable nor appealable.

16.4 Representation

When it delivers to a bargaining unit employee a notice of proposed or final disciplinary or adverse action, the Employer will advise the employee that he or she is entitled to self-representation, to Union representation, or to other appropriate representation. When the employee chooses to be represented by the Union, the Union will be allowed to be present via physically or via other means at any meeting between the employee and the Employer to discuss the action

A. Reprimands

A reprimand is a written letter to an Employee based on unacceptable conduct or poor performance. Prior notice is not required before the issuance of a reprimand. A reprimand shall state the specific reasons for the action. A reprimand shall remain in an Employee's Official Personnel Folder ("OPF") for up to two years, but may be removed by the Employer, at its sole discretion, anytime within the two-year period. A reprimand shall inform the Employee of his/her appeal/grievance rights as required by law.

B. Suspensions of 14 calendar days or less

An Employee against whom a suspension of 14 days or less is proposed is entitled to:

1. Advance written notice of the proposed action that specifies the reasons for the proposed action and informs the Employee of his/her rights to review the material that was relied upon to support the reason for the action;

2. Not less than 24 hours, but no more than 14 calendar days, to respond orally and/or in writing and to furnish affidavits and other documentary evidence in support of their response. The deciding official may extend the reply period if he/she determines that good cause exists for an extension based on extenuating circumstances. The Employer shall designate an official to hear the Employee's oral response who has the authority to make a final decision on the proposed adverse action. The right to answer orally does not include the right to a formal hearing with examination of witnesses;
3. Be represented by an attorney or other representative; and
4. A written decision at the earliest practicable date, containing the specific reasons for the decision and notifying the Employee of his/her appeal rights.

16.5 Adverse Actions

For the purpose of this agreement, adverse actions are defined as suspensions of more than 14 days, reductions-in-grade or pay, removals, and furloughs. Adverse actions shall be governed by applicable laws, rules, and regulations.

An Employee against whom an adverse action is proposed is entitled to:

- A. Thirty calendar days advance written notice of the proposed action, which specifies the nature of the proposed action and informs the Employee of his/her rights to review the material that was relied upon in proposing the suspension. If there is reasonable cause to believe that the Employee has committed a crime for which a sentence of imprisonment may be imposed, the proposed action may be effected less than 30 calendar days from the receipt of the advance written notice;
- B. Fourteen calendar days to respond orally and/or in writing and to furnish affidavits and other documentary evidence in support of their response. The deciding official may extend the reply period if he/she determines that good cause exists for an extension based on extenuating circumstances. The Employer shall designate an official to hear the Employee's oral answer who has authority to make a final decision on the proposed adverse action.
- C. Be represented by an attorney or other representative; and
- D. A written decision at the earliest practicable date, containing the specific reasons for the decision and informing the Employee of his/her appeal rights. To the extent practicable, an agency should issue a decision on a proposed removal within 15 business days of the conclusion of the employee's opportunity to respond to the proposed removal.

16.6 Notice Leave and Investigative Leave

A. Pursuant to 5 U.S.C. § 6329(b), the Employer may place an Employee on Investigative and/or Notice Leave when the Employer determines that an Employee must be removed from the workplace while under investigation or during a notice period (i.e., the period after the Employee has received a proposed notice of disciplinary/adverse action before a final decision is made and takes effect). These two types of leave may be used when the Employer has determined that the Employee's continued presence may:

1. Pose a threat to the Employee or others;
2. Result in the destruction of evidence relevant to an investigation;
3. Result in loss of damage to Government property; or

4. Otherwise jeopardize legitimate Government interests.

B. Before using either Investigative leave or Notice leave, the Employer shall consider options to avoid or minimize the use of paid leave, such as assigning the Employee to duties in which the Employee no longer poses a threat; allowing the Employee to take another form of eligible leave for an Employee if there is reasonable cause to believe the Employee has committed a crime for which a sentence of imprisonment may be imposed.

C. The use of Notice and Investigative Leave is subject to the time limitations and special approvals for extensions pursuant to 5 USC 6329(b).

D. Nothing in this section shall be construed to impose additional requirements on the agency not specifically outlined in applicable statutes, regulations, and local policy.

16.7 Alternative Discipline

A. The Employer and the Employee (the Parties) agree that alternative discipline may, under the right circumstances, be an efficient and effective approach in lieu of or in addition to traditional discipline. The Parties may consider and/or propose an alternative form of discipline at any stage during the disciplinary process. If the Employer and the Employee and/or his/her representative come to an agreement on an alternative form of discipline, the terms of the alternative discipline shall be set forth in a signed resolution/settlement agreement. The agreement may include, but is not limited to:

1. The specific form of the alternative discipline;
2. The date by which it is to be completed;
3. The charged misconduct and the proposed traditional discipline;
4. Recognition by the Parties that the alternative discipline may be referenced in any subsequent disciplinary action; and
5. A voluntary waiver of any appeal rights the Employee may have regarding the matter.

B. The following is a non-exhaustive list of types of alternative discipline the Parties may consider:

1. A leave donation by the Employee through the Employer's leave donation program equal to the amount of time that would have been spent on suspension;
2. Attendance by the Employee at an appropriate counseling program approved by the Employer's Employee Assistance Program;
3. Placing the Employee on Leave Without Pay in lieu of a formal disciplinary action;
4. A "paper suspension" whereby the Employee does not serve a suspension or lose pay, but the suspension may be relied on in future disciplinary actions for purposes of progressive discipline.
5. A Last Chance Agreement, in which the Employer agrees to hold an adverse action decision in abeyance in exchange for an Employee's:
 - a. Commitment to abide by a certain set of behaviors or conditions for a set period of time as determined by the Employer;
 - b. Waiver of his/her rights to challenge the decision; and

- c. Agreement that if the Employee fails to fulfill the terms of the agreement, the decision shall be implemented.

C. Nothing in this section shall require the Employer to use alternative discipline in lieu of formal disciplinary action. The failure of the parties to reach agreement regarding the use of alternative discipline is not a bargaining impasse that could be funneled to FMCS/FSIP for resolution.

16.8 Statutory Remedies

Statutory procedures and appeals (e.g., before the Merit Systems Protection Board) provide exclusive redress for alleged violation of employee rights involving appealable adverse actions under this Article. Pursuant to 5 USC 7121(a)(2), disputes over appealable adverse actions arising under this Article shall not be subject to the negotiated grievance and arbitration procedures.

16.9 Evidence Disclosure

On written request to Human Resources, to the extent permitted by applicable law, rule and regulation, the employee or the employee's representative will be provided with the evidence, and only that evidence, on which the Employer relied in proposing a disciplinary or adverse action.

Article 17: Reduction in Force (“RIF”) and Transfer of Function (“TOF”)

17.1 General Rules

The Employer and the Union recognize that employees may be seriously and adversely affected by a reduction-in-force and/or transfer of function. In the event of a reduction- in-force and/or transfer of function, the Employer shall notify the Union and fulfill its obligation to bargain consistent with 5 USC 71.

17.2 Notification to Union

A. When the Employer is anticipating a RIF or TOF, it shall provide the following to the Union thirty (30) days in advance of any official notice provided to the affected employees as required by 5 CFR 351:

1. The reason(s) why the actions may be taken.
2. The approximate number of employees who may be affected.
3. The types of positions anticipated to be affected; and
4. The anticipated effective date that action will be taken.

B. The Employer shall provide the Union, upon request, with information in accordance with 5 U.S.C. 7114(b)(4).

C. All RIF(s) and TOF(s) shall be conducted in accordance with 5 CFR 351.

Article 18: Official Time and Union Representatives

18.1 Purpose

This Article governs the use of “official time”, i.e., duty time during which bargaining unit employees serving as Union representatives and other bargaining unit employees perform activities set forth in 18.3 of this Article below, without loss of pay or charge to leave:

- (i) as they are entitled by 5 U.S.C. 7131(a) and (c), and
- (ii) As the Agency and Union agree, under the authority of 5 U.S.C. 7131(d), is reasonable, necessary and in the public interest.

18.2 Use of Official Time

A. Official time shall normally be granted for the purposes identified in Section 18.3 of this Article. The Representative shall not be released from their work assignments until the supervisor or designee grants approval for the official time.

B. The Union shall provide the Employer with a list of officers, representatives, and their alternates who are authorized by the Union to request and use official time. This list may be updated and modified from time to time. Normally, the Union shall submit any changes to the list in writing to the Employer’s representative three (3) business days before the individual will be recognized by the Employer as having authority to represent the Union and be granted official time for representational duties. In exceptional circumstances (e.g., when a new steward replaces an existing steward and is immediately confronted with a situation requiring Union representation), the Union may notify the Labor Relations staff or other representative orally, after which it shall send a written confirmation within three (3) business days.

18.3 Purposes of Official Time

A. Official time for representational purposes or activities is covered by 5 USC Section 7131 and shall include the following:

1. Attending or preparing to attend any formal discussion between one or more representatives of the Employer and one or more employees in the unit or their representatives concerning any grievance, personnel policy, practice, or other general condition of employment.
2. Attending or preparing to attend any examination of an employee in the unit by a representative of the Employer in connection with an investigation if: (i) the employee reasonably believes that the examination may result in disciplinary action against the employee, and (ii) the employee requests representation.
3. Attending or preparing to attend any meeting between a Union representative(s) and one or more representatives of the Employer that is initiated by either the Employer’s representative or the Union representative.
4. Preparing for and participating in bargaining, including mediation and/or the resolution of any bargaining impasse and/or negotiability dispute.
5. Preparing for and participating in proceedings of the Federal Labor Relations Authority, Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service, Federal Service Impasses Panel, Merit Systems Protection Board, and before an arbitrator appointed under Article 6, Arbitration, of this Agreement.

6. Preparing for and participating in Grievances, adverse actions and other appeals under relevant USDA/Rural Development regulations, and this Agreement.
7. Visiting, phoning and writing elected representatives concerning pending or desired legislation which would impact the conditions of employment of bargaining unit employees.
8. The Secretary and Treasurer of the Union shall each be allowed up to twenty-four (24) hours of official time per calendar year to (i) prepare financial and membership reports required by the U.S. Government, including reports to the U.S. Department of Labor and Internal Revenue Service, and (ii) maintain the records required by those reports. Further, the Secretary shall be granted reasonable official time to process Standard Forms 1187 (dues withholding).

B. The Union recognizes the Employer's responsibility to ensure that all official time approved under this provision is used for legitimate representational purposes and activities.

C. If the Union determines that official time is required for purposes other than those enumerated above, the Union and Employer shall negotiate concerning such use of official time.

18.4 Prohibited Uses of Official Time

Official time shall not be permitted for internal Union business including, but not limited to, the following:

- A. Attending meetings for internal Union business;
- B. Solicitation of membership;
- C. Collecting dues;
- D. Elections of Union officials;
- E. Preparing and distributing Union newspapers, flyers, bulletins or other publications;
- F. Discussing internal Union business by telephone, in person or otherwise;
- G. Engaging in partisan political activities; and
- H. Traveling to engage in any of these activities.

18.5 Procedures for Requesting Use of Official Time

The following procedures shall be followed for requesting the use of official time for purposes set forth in Section 18.3 of this Article.

- A. All requests for the use of official time shall be for finite periods of time and must be made in advance, normally at least forty-eight (48) hours, unless sufficient extenuating and unforeseeable circumstances prevent the employee from doing so.
- B. Requests for official time should include when, how long and the general purpose for which the time will be used as referred to in Section 18.3 A of this Article.
 - (i). The purpose should provide enough detail that the authorizing official can reasonably ascertain whether the requested time is reasonable and necessary to accomplish such tasks (i.e., attending a formal discussion or Weingarten meeting, preparation for term negotiations,

participation in mediation). The requesting employee shall not be required to betray confidences or compromise the privacy or strategy of the Union's representational activities.

C. Requests for the use of official time shall be made by the Union representative to their immediate supervisor or delegated official, or the second level supervisor if the immediate supervisor is absent or unavailable.

D. Supervisory approval of the period of official time must be obtained prior to the use of such official time.

E. In the event the Union representative using official time requires additional time due to unforeseen circumstances, the representative shall request and be granted an extension of time by telephone or other appropriate means. The request shall be made to the approving supervisor or, in that supervisor's absence, the delegated official or any available supervisor of the person's unit, section or division.

F. Upon the completion of a period of official time that is reasonable and necessary, the Union representative shall promptly return to work and notify the supervisor who approved the official time.

G. It is understood by the Parties that unforeseen needs may arise precluding advance approval, such as unexpected telephone calls to a Union representative. On such occasions, the Union representative shall: (i) notify the supervisor as soon as possible; and (ii) request approval by close of business on the same day.

H. The Employer shall respond to requests for official time in a timely manner, normally within twenty-four (24) hours, unless sufficient extenuating and unforeseeable circumstances prevent the Employer from doing so.

I. In the event that a Union representative's advance request for the use of official time is disapproved in whole or in part, the Employer shall notify the representative and Labor Relations in writing with the basis for the denial.

J. If, after making a good-faith effort, the Union is unable to designate an alternative representative to engage in the activity, the Employer shall make a reasonable effort to reschedule events or modify deadlines.

18.6 Employees' Right to Official Time

A. Employees are entitled to a reasonable amount of official time to consult with Union representatives on conditions of employment and to prepare for and attend meetings with the Employer regarding conditions of employment, including the participation in appeal proceedings. Employees shall follow the procedures in Section 18.5 of this Article to request official time.

B. In the event that an employee's request for the use of official time is denied, the employee may submit a request to use official time at an alternate date/time and/or that the deciding official reschedule representational events and/or modify deadlines in order to enable the employee to prepare and respond adequately to the event or action that gives rise to the request.

C. In the event that an employee's advance request for the use of official time is disapproved in whole or in part, the Employer shall notify the employee and Union representative in writing with the basis for the denial.

18.7 Time and Attendance

A. Official time must be recorded in the Employer's T&A system using the appropriate Transaction Code, and the employee's normal accounting code. The Program Entry should be RD00 Rural Development, and the Activity Code should be Sup-HR 512.

B. Official time used is to be recorded on the Union representatives' or employees' biweekly time sheet using the following codes:

1. Transaction Code 35 Term Negotiations. Any bargaining unit employee spending time on the clock preparing for and negotiating a term agreement (new agreement or re- opening) including ground rules, mediation, impasse proceedings and negotiability proceedings. This includes the chief spokesperson, note taker, and members of the Union negotiating team. This also applies to briefings, Interest Based Bargaining, Statutory bargaining, drafting proposals or information requests relating to bargaining.
2. Transaction Code 36 Mid-Term Negotiations. Any bargaining unit employee spending time on the clock preparing for and negotiating a mid-term agreement, including ground rules, mediation, impasse proceedings and negotiability proceedings. This includes the chief spokesperson, note taker, and members of the Union negotiating team. This applies to bargaining over issues raised during the life of a term agreement and includes briefings, Interest Based Bargaining, Statutory bargaining, drafting proposals or information requests relating to bargaining/change bargaining.
3. Transaction Code 37 General Labor-Management Relations. Any bargaining unit employee spending time on the clock representing the Union, which does not fall within transaction codes 35, 36 or 38 normally will be 37. This includes but is not limited to: Labor Management Forum meetings and working groups, working groups when acting for the Union, formal discussions, investigatory/Weingarten meetings, Union sponsored training/events, joint training, briefings, and consultation meetings.
4. Transaction Code 38 Dispute Resolution. Any bargaining unit employee spending time on the clock representing the Union in grievances or arbitrations, adverse action meetings, ADR meetings, EEO functions if designated by the Union, and ULP proceedings. Bargaining unit employees attending grievance meetings or representing themselves should also be using this code.

Article 19: Furloughs

19.1 General

Sometimes there are circumstances beyond the control of the Employer which may make it necessary to furlough employees.

The Employer has complete authority and responsibility with respect to all decisions regarding the furloughing of employees, including but not limited to, the specific employees furloughed, the days, dates, and times of the furlough, and the duration of the furlough.

Seniority will be considered in the furlough process. For purposes of this Article, in determining an employee's seniority, the Employer shall use the Retirement Service Computation Date.

By agreeing to this Article, the Union does not waive any individual employee's rights.

The Employer shall implement furloughs in accordance with the applicable governing statutes, rules and/or regulations, and Office of Personnel Management Guidelines (hereinafter referred to collectively as "law") current at the time of the furlough.

This Article addresses the policy and procedures associated with two (2) types of furlough: (a) Shutdown or Emergency Furloughs; and (b) Save Money Furloughs.

Upon receiving official notice of a potential furlough, the Employer shall notify the Union, as soon as practical, of the following:

1. Whether the furlough is a Shutdown (also called "Emergency") or a Save Money Furlough;
2. The expected beginning date of the furlough; and
3. The expected duration of the furlough.

For every furlough, the Employer shall compile a list of excepted employees (those employees not subject to the furlough). After it approves a finalized list, the Employer shall provide the Union with a list of the excepted employees at or around the same time it provides the information to the excepted employees.

During the period of a Shutdown (or Emergency) Furlough, an employee shall be regarded as in furlough status during the employee's normal Tour of Duty and Work Schedule, including Compressed Work Schedules, Alternative Work Schedules, Part-Time Work Schedules and associated Off Days. To the best of the Employer's ability, the Employer shall refer to furlough periods in terms of hours rather than days.

During a furlough, and unless contrary to law, leave status shall be handled as follows:

1. Annual, sick, court, military leave, credit or compensatory time shall be suspended during the term of the furlough.
2. Employees on approved leave without pay (LWOP) shall remain on LWOP.
3. Employees on Continuation of Pay (COP) status shall remain on COP status.
4. Employees may accept outside employment while on furlough provided such employment does not pose a conflict of interest with their official USDA RD duties. Employees wishing to engage in outside employment should refer to the Office of Ethics website at www.usda.gov/ethics; and

5. Employees on LWOP under the Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA) during the furlough shall continue to be charged LWOP or be placed in a furlough status. However, employees on FMLA but in a pay status must be placed on furlough instead; the furlough time shall not reduce the 12-week entitlement period.

Based on the length of the furlough, the Employer shall adjust Performance Plan Standards accordingly.

The Employer shall not use furloughs as punishment or discipline in lieu of other means of addressing behavior, conduct, or performance.

All time periods within which a party or employee may or must act pursuant to the terms of the Collective Bargaining Agreement shall be tolled for the duration of any furlough.

19.2 Save Money Furloughs

If the Employer must furlough employees as a means of addressing a budget shortfall, the Employer may solicit volunteers to be placed in extended LWOP status; or

If the Employer must furlough employees as a means of saving or reducing expenditures, the Employer shall:

1. Solicit volunteers to work reduced hours in conjunction with LWOP; and
2. Allow affected employees to choose which workdays shall serve as their furlough days, with advanced approval of a supervisor and in accordance with Employer leave request requirements.

Management reserves the right to deny a request for LWOP.

Should an insufficient number of employees in a work unit volunteer for LWOP and the Employer must furlough employees in that work unit, the Employer shall furlough qualified employees by reverse seniority, where the least senior employees are the first employees furloughed. In determining an employee's seniority, the Employer shall use the Retirement Service Computation Date.

19.3 - Shutdown (Emergency) Furloughs

As soon as a Shutdown (or Emergency) Furlough is announced, the Employer shall provide all non-essential employees with all relevant and necessary instruction and information available to the Employer.

If directed by the Employer, all furloughed employees shall report to work on the first day of the Shutdown (or Emergency) Furlough for a period of either four (4) hours or as long as is required to complete those tasks necessary for an orderly shutdown, whichever is less. If a furloughed employee has any telework agreement in place (scheduled or ad hoc), they may seek approval from their supervisor to telework on the first day and complete their shutdown activities remotely.

As often as practical, the Employer shall keep employees apprised of the status of the furlough.

Employees on scheduled leave at the conclusion of the furlough may remain on leave until their previously scheduled return to duty date.

Non-essential employees shall be paid for the Shutdown (Emergency) Furlough days only to the extent permitted by Congress. Excepted employees and non-essential employees shall be paid for any time worked pursuant to the second paragraph above of this Section, but not until a continuing resolution or appropriation is enacted.

Article 20: Term of Agreement, Negotiation of Amendments and of Changes in Conditions of Employment

20.1 Effective Date and Duration of the Agreement

Pursuant to 5 USC 7114(c), this Agreement shall become effective on the date it is approved by the Agency Head or on the 31st day after execution, whichever occurs first.

This Agreement shall remain in effect for a term of three (3) years from its effective date. Thereafter, it shall automatically renew in increments of one (1) year unless either party serves the other with written notice of a desire to re-negotiate or modify this agreement in whole or in part. Such notice shall be provided to the party not more than one hundred and five (105) calendar days nor less than sixty (60) calendar days prior to the expiration date of this agreement.

20.2 Effect of the Agreement

Matters covered by this Agreement shall not be subject to change by either party during the Agreement's term, absent mutual consent of the Parties, except for changes mandated by law, as permitted by 20.3, or as permitted by this agreement.

With respect to conditions of employment not covered by this Agreement, the Agency has the right, pursuant to 5 USC 7106, "Management Rights", to change such conditions of employment as permitted by 20.4.

When engaging in bargaining during the term of this Agreement, the parties shall follow the procedures in this article or procedures agreed to at the time of bargaining.

20.3 Mid-Term Reopening of the Agreement to Alter/Amend/Renegotiate Articles

By mutual agreement, the parties may reopen an Article or Articles at any time in this Agreement's duration.

Either party may reopen up to three (3) Articles of this Agreement at the mid-term by giving the other written notice of its desire to do so during the ninety (90) calendar days immediately preceding the eighteen (18) month anniversary (or "monthiversary") of the Agreement's effective date. The timeframes and procedures for mid-term negotiations shall be those provided by 20.4 of this Article for end-of-duration negotiations.

20.4 Negotiations During the Term of This Agreement About Matters This Agreement Does Not Cover

A. In the event the Employer decides to make a change affecting conditions of employment subject to bargaining under 5 USC Chapter 71, and not covered by existing federal laws, government-wide rules and regulations or Department/Employer policies at the time the Agreement was executed, or by this Agreement, the Employer shall provide the Union advance written notice as described below before implementation unless exigent circumstances exist.

20.5 General Bargaining Procedures.

A. Management shall provide the Union with ten (10) days advance notice of changes in working conditions subject to bargaining with the Union. Such notice shall be provided in writing to the Union.

B. Following the Union's receipt of notice of proposed changes in working conditions, the Union shall have seven (7) days to submit a demand to bargain concerning the proposed changes. The Union will submit proposals within fourteen (14) after its demand to bargain is received by the Agency.

C. Following receipt of the Union's proposals, Management shall have ten (10) days to present its written counterproposals to the Union.

D. Bargaining shall commence as soon as possible following the Union's receipt of Management's counterproposals, but in no case later than 14 days.

E. The Parties may alter any of the above time frames by mutual agreement.

F. The Parties shall be represented at any negotiations by duly authorized representatives.

G. If, due to a bargaining impasse, the parties are unable to reach agreement within ten (10) days following the initiation of bargaining, either Party may declare impasse and request the services of a mediator from the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service ("FMCS").

H. If the Parties are unable to resolve their differences assisted by the efforts of the FMCS mediator and the mediator declares an impasse, either Party may submit remaining disputes to the Federal Service Impasses Panel ("FSIP"), if necessary.

20.6 Post-Mediation Procedures

When both parties have the right to submit remaining disputes to the FSIP, they also have the right to propose the use of Alternative Dispute Resolution ("ADR"; see Article 30, "Alternative Dispute Resolution").

If the Agency intends to implement the proposed change in working conditions, it shall give the Union appropriate notice including the effective date. Such notice shall provide the Union a reasonable opportunity to seek Panel assistance before the Agency implements the change.

20.7 Reopening or Automatic Renewal at the End of the Agreement's Term

At the end of its three (3) year duration, this Agreement shall automatically renew for periods of one (1) year unless either party serves the other with written notice of its desire to reopen and renegotiate/modify this Agreement in whole or in part. A party wishing to serve such notice on the other shall do so not more than one hundred five (105) calendar days nor less than sixty (60) calendar days prior to the expiration date of this Agreement. This Agreement will remain in effect during periods of renegotiation and until a new agreement is in effect. This Agreement becomes null if it is determined that the Union is no longer entitled to exclusive recognition in accordance with the provisions of 5 USC, Chapter 71.

The Parties shall exchange Ground Rules proposals simultaneously within thirty (30) days of a notice to renegotiate.

Negotiations shall begin no later than fourteen (14) days after the Parties exchange Ground Rule proposals. The Parties may mutually agree to extend these timeframes.

Article 21 Dues Withholding

21.1 General

- A. Bargaining unit employees may make a voluntary allotment for the payment of dues to the Union.
- B. In implementing the dues withholding program, the Employer and Union will be governed by the provisions of 5 USC 7115 and this Article.

21.2 Dues Withholding

In order to initiate dues withholding, an employee must complete and sign a Standard Form (SF)-1187, Request for Payroll Deductions for Labor Organization Dues, and submit it to the Union. The Union will certify that the employee is a member in good standing and submit the completed SF-1187 to Employee Services Division (ESD), through the HR Service Request ticketing tool or successor. One standard amount for all employees or different amounts of dues based upon employee grade may be specified. Dues deductions will become effective within three (3) pay periods of Agency receipt.

Dues deductions will be made electronically each pay period by the Employer and remittances will be made promptly each pay period to a single account provided by the Union.

21.3 Dues Withholding List

The Employer, through the National Finance Center or designee shall promptly forward to the National Union a listing of dues withheld via electronic means each pay period. The listing shall show the name of each member employee from whose pay dues was withheld, the amount withheld, the Agency code, and the number of the Local (571). The list will also include the name of each employee member who previously made an allotment for whom no deduction was made that pay period, whether due to leave without pay or other cause. Such employees shall be designated with an appropriate explanatory term.

21.4 Change in Amount of Dues

The Union may not change the amount of dues more than once in a twelve-month period. When the amount of regular dues changes, the Union will notify Labor Relations of that change in writing. Labor Relations will acknowledge and forward by email to ESD for inclusion in future allotments and the Union will be copied. This will take effect within four (4) pay periods of notification to ESD.

21.5 Termination of Dues Withholding

The Employer will terminate an allotment of Union dues withholding:

- A. as of the beginning of the first full pay period following receipt of notice that exclusive recognition has been withdrawn;
- B. at the end of the pay period during which an employee member is separated from the Agency or transferred to a position not covered by the bargaining unit. ESD and the employee have a mutual responsibility to assure timely revocation of the dues withholding;
- C. at the end of the pay period during which ESD receives a notice from the Union that an employee member has ceased to be a member in good standing; or
- D. in accordance with Section 21.7 Procedure to Cease Deductions.

21.6 Correction of Errors

The Employer agrees that the total error in the amount of dues withheld from employees shall be adjusted as soon as practicable after the Employer has discovered the error or has received written notification from the Union of the error. The Parties agree that the Employer will be held harmless for any corrected errors.

If an employee has been improperly separated and is ordered reinstated by the appropriate authority to a bargaining unit position, the employee is required to initiate a new SF-1187 to restart dues withholding if they voluntarily elect to do so.

21.7 Procedure to Cease Deductions

a. Within the First Year: An SF-1188, Cancellation of Payroll Deductions for Labor Organization Dues, may be filed by an employee with ESD prior to the anniversary date of their first dues withholding. It is the employee's responsibility to ensure timely filing of the revocation forms. A revocation received by ESD during the course of the employee's first year of dues allotment will become effective no later than the second pay period after the first anniversary of the pay period the Union dues deductions began.

b. After the First Year: Any subsequent voluntary revocation after the first year of Union dues deductions will be processed as soon as administratively feasible.

Article 22: Distribution

After review and approval by appropriate officials, the Employer shall distribute via email copies of this Agreement to each current and new Bargaining Unit Employees and Supervisors. Likewise, any subsequent supplemental agreements or amendments occurring during the term of this Agreement shall be distributed to all Bargaining Unit Employees and Supervisors. Employees are permitted to print personal copies of this Agreement utilizing the Employer's printers and facilities.

Article 23: Employee Assistance Program (“EAP”)

23.1 Policy Statement

Rural Development employees shall be covered by applicable provisions of law, rule, regulation and departmental policy.

The Employer recognizes that many personal problems include alcoholism which is a treatable illness and other personal problems such as substance abuse (drugs) or family, financial, legal, personal or interpersonal difficulties may impair the health or interfere with the job performance, of some employees.

The purpose of this policy is to encourage employees to take advantage of the services of this program. Employees may also voluntarily request referral or refer themselves to the EAP whether job performance, attendance, or conduct is affected or not.

23.2 Supervisory Responsibilities

The Employer shall immediately inform an employee of the EAP when the employee acknowledges having a problem which may be under the coverage of the Program.

It is recognized that supervisors and other management officials do not have the professional qualifications to make any diagnosis or judgments as to the cause of an employee’s job performance and/or conduct, but may assess job performance and conduct and may take appropriate corrective action.

23.3 Employee Rights and Responsibilities

Employees shall not be denied employment or deprived of job security or promotional opportunities solely on the ground of prior alcohol, drug or emotional problems, nor when or because an employee requests counseling and/or referral assistance. (The foregoing sentence shall not be construed as limiting the Employer's right to take appropriate action with respect to the employment of any employee based on past or present alcohol, drug or emotional problems, conduct, and performance that are materially relevant to the employee's present and future employment and to the proper functioning of the employee in that employment.)

Employees experiencing personal problems such as those identified in 23.1, which interfere with job performance and/or conduct, are encouraged to voluntarily seek confidential counseling and assistance through the EAP.

It shall be the employee’s responsibility to comply with referrals for diagnosis and cooperate with prescribed treatment. When an employee refuses to accept diagnosis and treatment or fails to respond to treatment and his/her job performance, and/or conduct, continues to be unsatisfactory, disciplinary action against the employee may be initiated by the Employer. In the case of an employee who is experiencing personal problems that interfere with his/her job performance and/or conduct but who is cooperating and progressing in the EAP, the Employer shall consider delaying corrective action and/or mitigating any penalties.

In accordance with Article 3, “Rights of Employees, Union, and Employer” and Article 5, “Negotiated Grievance Procedure”, of this Agreement, employees have a right to grieve disciplinary action and may seek Union representation.

23.4 Confidentiality

A. All matters associated with any employee’s participation in the EAP, shall remain confidential.

B. Without the expressed written consent of the employee, the Parties shall not share any information regarding an employee's participation in the EAP, or any information collected/gathered as a result of the employee's participation in the EAP, with anyone not having a "need to know."

C. Management will investigate and take appropriate action for known confidentiality violations.

23.5 Leave

It is the policy of the Employer to grant the use of annual leave and/or sick leave, including advanced leave in accordance with RD Instruction 2066-A for the purpose of treatment or rehabilitation.

23.6 Employee Notification

Availability of EAP shall be posted on official bulletin boards and appropriate notification of changes to the EAP shall be made to all RD employees.

Article 24: Employee Recognition/Awards Programs

The Union and the Employer acknowledge the importance of timely recognition of employees for high quality contributions to the Department and its mission. Recognition and encouragement by the Employer are important incentives that increase employee job satisfaction and contribute to the overall quality of work performance.

Management retains their right to exercise discretion to issue or to not issue employee awards. It is recognized by the Parties that there are no entitlements to awards, and all awards should be issued in the best interest of the Department, its employees and the American taxpayer. If the Agency issues awards to employees, it shall do so in a consistent and objective manner without discrimination, and in accordance with current Department policy, applicable laws, rules, and regulations.

Article 25: Reassignments and Details

25.1 Purpose

Reassignments/Details of RD employees shall be made by the Employer in accordance with 5 CFR, Part 335, Promotion and Interim Placement, Subpart A, and in accordance with RD Instruction 2045-C, "Merit Promotion Program", and this Agreement. This Article provides noncompetitive procedures to be followed by the Employer when temporarily or permanently assigning bargaining unit employees to other bargaining unit positions or locations within RD, and when assigning bargaining unit employees to "special project assignments". These procedures shall not apply when the competitive procedures described in Article 10 of this Agreement are being utilized or the following occurs:

1. The position is being filled by an Employer-initiated or employee-initiated demotion or reassignment of an employee (e.g., in response to performance deficiencies in the current position)
2. The position is being filled by directive of a third party (e.g., arbitrator, EEOC, MSPB, FLRA, etc.) or is being filled as a resolution to a formal grievance, complaint, or appeal.
3. The position is being filled by an individual due special consideration as a result of reduction-in-force, re-promotion rights, re-employment priority rights, return from military furlough/leave, etc.
4. The Employer is otherwise required by law, regulation, or controlling Labor-Management Relations Agreement to select a specific individual for the position.

25.2 Selection of Employees

Informal details are those which do not exceed thirty (30) calendar days. The Employer shall submit a memorandum to the employee documenting the duties of any detail in excess of two (2) weeks. A copy shall be forwarded to the Personnel Office for inclusion in the employee's Official Personnel Folder. Formal details shall be documented in the Official Personnel File by memorandum and appropriate supporting attachments. Special projects which exceed thirty (30) calendar days shall be documented in the employee's Official Personnel File by memorandum.

25.3 Employer-Initiated Reassignments/Details

The parties acknowledge that the Employer has the right to detail and to reassign employees as necessary. This agreement in no way waives that right. In those instances where the Employer has determined that a reassignment, or detail expected to last more than thirty (30) consecutive days is appropriate, the Employer shall determine the qualifications and skills necessary to perform the assignment, shall solicit volunteers from among those qualified, and shall consider those volunteers prior to making its selections. In determining whether volunteers shall be considered for the assignment, the Employer shall determine the qualifications necessary to successfully function in the position and to meet the needs of the Employer. The Employer shall also determine whether volunteers for the assignments meet those qualifications. The Employer shall not be required to select from the list of volunteers.

The detail of an employee to a position at the same grade level shall normally not exceed one hundred twenty (120) days, although it may be extended for additional time. Employees detailed to a position at the same grade level for more than one hundred twenty (120) days shall be provided with a copy of the position description and a performance plan for the position. For details of one hundred twenty (120) days or less, performance requirements should be incorporated and reflected in the existing performance plan. Formal details shall be documented with SF-52, "Request For Personnel Action."

Details shall not be used to circumvent competitive procedures or be used to give an unfair competitive advantage to the employee detailed to a higher graded position.

Employees detailed to a higher graded position for more than thirty (30) days shall be provided with a copy of the position description and a performance plan for the position within thirty (30) days of the beginning of the detail. An employee may not be non-competitively detailed to a higher graded position for more than one hundred twenty (120) days. A detail to a higher graded position for more than sixty (60) days requires a temporary promotion. Rotating an employee in and out of a detailed position may not circumvent this provision.

Article 26: Intentionally left Blank

Article 27: Use of the Internet and Email System

27.1 Limits on Personal Use of Government E-Mail

Usage of the Employer's telecommunications and internet services is governed by USDA DR 3300-001. Further, limited personal use of the Internet and the Government e-mail system is authorized provided that such use:

- A. Does not adversely affect the performance of official duties by the USDA employee or the USDA employee organization;
- B. Is of reasonable duration and frequency, and whenever possible, made during the USDA employees personal time such as after-duty hours or lunch periods;
- C. Serves a legitimate public interest (such as educating the USDA employee on the use of the telecommunications system; enhancing the professional skills of the USDA employee; job searching in response to Federal Government downsizing);
- D. Does not put Federal Government telecommunications systems to uses that would reflect adversely on USDA or the Employer (such as uses involving pornography; playing on-line games; for purposes of private business; chain letters; unofficial advertising, soliciting or selling except on authorized bulletin boards established for such use; violations of statute or regulation; inappropriately handled sensitive information; and other uses that are incompatible with public service);
- E. Does not overburden the telecommunications system (such as may be the case with broadcasts and group mailings), and creates no significant additional cost to USDA or to the Employer;
- F. Follow the policy of the Internet Activities Board ("IAB") as stated in RFC 1087; and
- G. Is not used for partisan political purposes at any time.

27.2 No Expectation of Privacy When Using Government Email

Bargaining unit employees and the Union shall use Federal Government telecommunications systems with the understanding that such use serves as consent to monitoring of any type of use, including incidental and personal uses, whether authorized or unauthorized. In addition, access of such systems is not anonymous. For example, for each use of the Internet over Federal Government systems, these systems may capture information transmitted, received or stored on the system.

Article 28: Official Personnel Files

Rural Development employees shall continue to be covered by the provisions of the RD Instruction 2054-V, "Basic Personnel Records and Files System".

Article 29: Position Description and Classification

Rural Development employees shall continue to be covered by RD Instruction 2048-A, "Position Classification."

29.1 Position Description

Each employee shall be provided with a copy of their Official Position Description which accurately reflects the major duties and responsibilities of that position within fifteen (15) days of assignment to the position. Employees are encouraged to discuss with the Employer (usually the employees' immediate supervisors) any discrepancies between their position descriptions and their actual duties assigned and submit draft revisions.

The Employer shall be responsible to make adjustments where appropriate.

29.2 Position Classification

An employee who feels that their position is improperly classified is encouraged to first discuss the matter with the Employer (usually their immediate supervisor). If dissatisfied, the employee shall confer with the proper personnel representative in an effort to resolve the matter informally. This effort to informally resolve the matter must include consideration of a desk audit/classification review. If the matter cannot be informally resolved, the employee shall be furnished with information on appeals as located in RD Instruction 2048-A. Employee may request assistance from Union representatives on classification appeals.

Article 30: Alternative Dispute Resolution

30.1 Policy

Alternative Dispute Resolution (“ADR”) is the name given to informal conflict-resolution methods which seek early settlement of workplace differences as an alternative to protracted and costly formal procedures. The Employer and the Union are committed to the use of ADR to foster a good labor-management relationship. The Union and the Employer shall always explore the usefulness of ADR methods to resolve disputed matters.

30.2 Nature and Design of ADR

Any ADR process shall be jointly designed by Union and the Employer. ADR should be effective, timely, and efficient. ADR should focus on conflict resolution, problem-solving, and fostering a cooperative labor-management relationship. Participation in ADR shall be voluntary by both parties.

30.3 Agency Support for Use of ADR

To the extent budgetary and mission constraints permit, the Employer shall support ADR training and shall pay for such training as well as authorize Official Time. Each party shall be responsible for selecting those representatives who are to receive training.

30.4 ADR Resolutions Non-Precedential

ADR resolution shall not be precedential unless specifically agreed to by the parties.

Article 31: Telework

31.1 Agency Policy

Bargaining unit employees may telework consistent with the Agency's telework policy subject to mission requirements and applicable laws, government-wide rules and regulations, and OPM policy.