

**Forest Service Handbook
National Headquarters - Washington Office
Washington, DC**

**Forest Service Handbook 6209.12 – Correspondence Handbook
Chapter 10 - Noncontrolled Correspondence**

Amendment: 6209.12-2014-1

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Responsible Staff:

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Digest: Following is an explanation of the changes throughout the directive by section.

6209.12: Revises entire handbook with extensive edits throughout.

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Guidance documents lack the force and effect of law, unless expressly authorized by statute or incorporated into a contract. USDA may not cite, use, or rely on any guidance that is not available through their guidance portal, except to establish historical facts.

10.2 - Objectives

To provide a consistent process for drafting, reviewing, approving, mailing, storing, and tracking correspondence related to United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Forest Service programs and activities.

11 - Electronic Correspondence Management System Overview for Uncontrolled Correspondence

11.1 - The Electronic Correspondence Management System

1. Use the authorized electronic correspondence management system for all official Forest Service correspondence, both formal and informal. The system is used for creation of the draft, review (electronic concurrence) and revision, electronic or surface mailing, and archiving (filing). If the correspondence contains highly sensitive or confidential matters (including personally identifiable information), ensure appropriate electronic access configurations are set to limit viewing to those with a need to know, as applicable.

See section 11.3, exhibit 01 for a list of file code categories that are particularly likely to contain sensitive or confidential material, which may not be appropriate for entry in the electronic correspondence management system.

The electronic correspondence management system contains a document history that identifies the correspondence's creation date, author, file code, subject, and signing and mailing dates. This information and the document itself may be viewable by multiple persons within the Agency. How broadly depends on administrative settings. Always be aware of the system's open access nature when determining the appropriateness of using it for your documents.

2. Enter all relevant or necessary elements of metadata, such as subject key words, description or staff acronyms.
3. If safety or confidentiality concerns preclude the inclusion of material in the electronic correspondence management system, you must develop program-specific alternative storage, tracking, and retrieval procedures for this material, with appropriate access privileges.
4. Forest Service employees have the obligation to use information as authorized and directed; to use information in a manner consistent with position descriptions; and to protect information from unauthorized access. Employees must not disclose, release, disseminate, or transfer any sensitive information to any other person or entity, except as required in the performance of the employee's duties, complying with policy, procedures, and responsibilities.

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Public release of information must be in accordance with the Privacy Act and the Freedom of Information Act. All requests for information from a non-USDA individual or entity must be referred to your Freedom of Information Act representative or the Office of General Counsel.

11.2 - Letterhead

1. Always use the Agency's official formal and informal letterheads for all official correspondence.
 - a. Letterheads are available as electronic templates in the electronic correspondence management system.
 - b. Letterhead templates will be customized for each administrative unit by adding the appropriate name and address to the heading.
2. Use only approved logos, slogans, and templates on official correspondence; do not modify the letterhead in any way, including with anniversary logos, watermarks, special event slogans, and so forth.
3. Changes to letterhead must be authorized by appropriate officials.

11.3 - File Codes

1. The appropriate file code category must be included in formal or informal correspondence. File code categories correspond to a subject or staff and indicate filing instructions and records retention schedules. See FSH 6209.11, Records Management Handbook, for a complete list of file codes.

The file code determines:

- a. Distribution of the letter when mailed electronically. If the file code is incorrect, the document may not arrive at its intended destination.
 - b. Filing (or archival) location of program area files. Official copies of correspondence will be filed according to file code category.
2. Each file code category corresponds to a unique heading and subheading, describing its subject or staff. File code headings and subheadings are not displayed in the document, but they may appear in the document summary (metadata). Select the code that best corresponds to the primary subject of the letter.
 - a. Only use multiple file code categories when more than one primary subject is discussed. There is a limit of 3 file code categories per document.

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- b. Enter routing codes, abbreviations, or acronyms in other locations.

- 3. See exhibit 01 for a list of file codes that are particularly likely to contain sensitive or confidential material, which may not be appropriate for entry in the electronic correspondence management system.

Note: The list is not comprehensive or absolute. Sensitive or confidential material may occur under other file codes, and not everything under these file codes will definitely be sensitive. Individual pieces of correspondence should be assessed carefully for the information they contain.

11.3 - Exhibit 01

Some File Codes in Need of Special Care

- 1700 – Civil Rights
- 1760 – Equal Employment Opportunity
- 1770 – Federal Financial Assistance Programs
- 5300 – Law Enforcement
- 5320 – Investigation
- 5330 – Law Violations
- 6100 – Personnel
- 6120 – Programs, Standards, Actions, and Documents
- 6130 – Employment and Status Changes
- 6140 – Employee Development, Performance, Awards
- 6140 – Personnel Relations and Services: Personnel Counseling
- 6150 – Classification and Pay
- 6160 – Attendance, Leave, and Telework
- 6170 – Personnel Relations and Services
- 6180 – Insurance and Annuities
- 6320 – Contracting: Solicited and Unsolicited Bids and Proposals
- 6570 – Claims
- 6730 – Accident Reporting and Investigation

11.4 - “Route To” Field for Informal Letters

On most Forest Service internal correspondence, the file code functions as the routing guide. Mail is routed by the file code to the appropriate “Mailroom” profile, and then routed to the appropriate staffs by a Forest Service Mail Liaison. Because mail is routed according to file code or staff abbreviation (FSH 6209.14, sec. 24.2), if mail is received without the proper file code, this will delay distribution.

Occasionally, if the file code does not adequately indicate the staff (or staffs) to which a letter is intended to be routed, the “Route To” field may be used.

1. Select a “Route To” code from the list of available codes.
2. Use multiple “Route To” codes if necessary, but limit to one if possible.

11.5 - Required Response Time

Answer formal or informal general correspondence within established time frames from the day the correspondence is stamped received, unless otherwise specified. If a complete reply cannot be prepared and signed within 30 days, consider acknowledging receipt or sending an interim response. If possible, state the reason(s) for the delay and the approximate date when the final reply can be expected.

11.6 - Formal and Informal Correspondence Determinations

11.61 - Formal Correspondence Criteria

Use the formal correspondence letterhead template when writing to:

1. The White House, Members of Congress, other Federal government agencies, State, Tribal, or local governments, or organizations outside the Federal government, such as corporations, associations, or societies.
2. Members of the public, including individuals or groups who are considering or have filed formal grievances or legal actions against the Agency. For example, send formal letters to appellants when issuing appeal decisions by Forest Service officers, when responding to Freedom of Information Act or Privacy Act requests, when corresponding with litigants or their attorneys, and when announcing important program initiatives.
3. Individuals inside the Forest Service regarding a personnel-related or sensitive subject. Examples are letters of commendation, congratulations, recognition, or condolence. However, you may prefer to use informal letterhead to convey a more personal tone and impression than that conveyed by the highly structured headings of the formal letterhead.

Electronic procedures for formal correspondence may be found in section 12.

11.62 - Informal Correspondence Criteria

Use the informal correspondence letterhead template when writing to:

1. Individuals inside the Forest Service, when a more informal tone is appropriate. Examples are delegations of authority, announcements, or “reply due” requests for information.
2. Other agencies or offices within USDA, when the letter is routine, such as informational memos.

Electronic procedures for informal correspondence may be found in section 13.

11.63 - Formal and Informal Procedure Similarities

Always follow these procedures when creating formal or informal uncontrolled correspondence:

1. Decide if the letter is formal or informal.
2. Use the correct template or letterhead.
3. Enter a file code category.
4. Designate signer by authority found in FSM 1230.
5. Establish concurrence flows and ensure concurrence.
6. Track electronically.
7. Mail the letter.
8. Follow established processes for managing the official record copy. See also FSM 6230.

11.64 - Correspondence That Must Be Controlled

All correspondence received from Members of Congress must be controlled, even if the correspondence will be answered at the local level. After signature, forward a copy of the incoming letter and a copy of the signed response to the ORMS correspondence team. The correspondence team will assign a control number and enter the material in the USDA’s electronic correspondence management system. This will allow the material to be tracked and identified later, if a need arises, such as a follow-up question or more correspondence on the same subject.

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Other correspondence may be controlled at the discretion of the Regions or other local staff. For example, a sensitive or high-level inquiry that requires review by the USDA, the Forest Service Chief, or a staff Director or subject matter expert in the Washington Office may be identified for special handling through the controlled correspondence process. Contact the ORMS correspondence team to make arrangements.

See chapter 20, for more detailed information about controlled correspondence procedures.

12 - Procedures for Formal Correspondence

For more complete style and format guidelines, pertaining to all types of correspondence at the Forest Service, see FSH 6209.12, chapter 30.

The following information is specific to formal or informal correspondence that is uncontrolled.

12.1 - Letterhead Template for a Formal Letter

1. Use the established formal letterhead for formal correspondence.
2. Printed captions, such as “Subject” or “To,” do not appear on a formal letter.
3. The formal letter includes a salutation and a complimentary close and is directed personally to the addressee.
4. See chapter 30 for more detailed instruction regarding titles, addresses, salutations, style and formatting guidelines, complimentary closes, and signature blocks.
5. See exhibit 01 for an example of a formal letter using the formal letterhead template for the Washington Office.

12.1 - Exhibit 01

Sample Formal Letter

Correct formal letterhead

USDA United States Department of Agriculture
Forest Service Washington Office
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20250

File Code: 6220
Date:

File code goes here

*Date will be stamped here
- after letter is signed*

Mr. Joe Smith
Chairman
Concerned Letter Writers of America
1234 Main Street
Kansas City, MO 64106

Correct salutation

Dear Mr. Smith:

Thank you for your recent letter, expressing your organization's concerns about, etc., etc.

Body of the response ... Body of the response ... Body of the response ...

Again, thank you for writing. If you have any questions, please contact, etc.

Complimentary close

Sincerely,

Appropriate signing authority

THOMAS L. TIDWELL
Chief

Caring for the Land and Serving People Printed on Recycled Paper

12.2 - Date of a Formal (or Informal) Letter

Letters are not dated until they are signed. The date on the letter indicates when the letter was signed and mailed, not when it was initially drafted, since there could be a delay between drafting and signature.

When the letter is subsequently finalized and archived, the electronic correspondence management system may default to the current date. If the date the letter was signed is different from the current date, remember to replace the default date with the correct date. Ensure that the date on the archived letter corresponds with the date the letter was actually signed.

12.3 - Reference (RE:) Line for a Formal Letter

1. If a RE: line is desired, it should be added below the address and salutation.
2. Limit the RE: line to one line.
3. Use a RE: line on formal correspondence pertaining to legal issues, Freedom of Information Act requests, appeals, environmental impact statements, land management plans, or other formal correspondence with non-Forest Service clients in those instances where it is necessary to identify case files and relevant information about a case.
4. Do not use a RE: line on formal controlled White House or Congressional correspondence.

12.4 - Notes “To the Record”

Use this notation when adding supporting information to the file copy that is not included in the text or that is not on the original letter sent to the addressee. In such cases, leave one blank line on the file copy between the last entry and “To the record:” and add the new information at this location.

12.5 - Review and Concurrence for Formal (or Informal) Letters

Note: Concurrence and review procedures may differ for controlled correspondence. See chapter 20 for more detailed instructions. These procedures are also subject to change and should be undertaken with care and attentiveness to current guidelines.

1. Correspondence will be reviewed by appropriate staff and formally concurred upon, in accordance with established procedures.
2. Upon review, notes may be added to the concurrence (or non-concurrence) to indicate specific concerns or instructions.

3. After concurrence (or non-concurrence) by one reviewer, the correspondence will be forwarded to the next person on the review list.
4. Once all reviewers have concurred (or not concurred), the letter will be returned to the person responsible for final format, grammar, spelling, and punctuation review.
5. All necessary concurrences must be completed before correspondence is forwarded for signature.

12.6 - Finalizing the Formal (or Informal) Letter

After the correspondence has been signed, dated, and sent out, appropriate steps must be taken to ensure that an electronically-signed and dated copy is finalized in the electronic correspondence management system, in accordance with all current requirements.

Filing requirements must be met as well. See chapter 50, section 52, for instructions on filing hard copy and electronic correspondence.

13 - Procedures for Informal Correspondence

13.1 - Informal Letterhead Templates

1. Use the informal electronic letterhead template.
2. Use the established Region or Forest informal letterhead formats for Regional or Forest informal correspondence.
3. See exhibit 01 for an example of an informal letter using the informal letterhead template for the Washington Office.

13.1 - Exhibit 01

Sample Informal Letter

Forest Service Washington Office 1400 Independence Avenue, SW Washington, DC 20250

File Code: 6220 Date: _____
Route To: _____
Subject: Recent changes to WO security policies
To: All WO Employees

REPLY DUE DECEMBER 10, 2012

Body of the letter ... Body of the letter ... Body of the letter
Body of the letter ... Body of the letter ... Body of the letter

THOMAS L. TIDWELL
Chief

USDA America's Working Forests – Caring Every Day in Every Way Printed on Recycled Paper

13.2 - Elements That Are the Same in Formal and Informal Letters

Many directions are the same for formal and informal letters. In addition to the general guidelines contained in chapter 30, some instructions that pertain to both formal and informal letters may be found in section 12 of this chapter:

1. Section 12.2 contains directions for the date on a formal or informal letter.
2. Section 12.5 contains directions for the review and concurrence of formal and informal letters.
3. Section 12.6 contains directions for finalizing a formal or informal letter after signature.

13.3 - Address for an Informal Letter

13.31 - “To:” Field for the Addressee of an Informal Letter

1. Enter the appropriate position title(s) after the “To:” line.
2. Address letters intended for units within the same Region to the Regional Forester, staff Director(s), or Forest staff officer(s).
3. Capitalize the first letter of each title regardless of whether a name accompanies the title.
4. Although the letter is normally addressed to the position (a title) rather than to the name of a person who holds the position, if a letter is personal, use the person’s name without the title of the position. Examples of Positions or Titles:

Chief
Station Director, Pacific Southwest Research Station
Regional Forester, Southern Region
Area Director, Northeastern Area
Forest Supervisor, Ashley National Forest
District Ranger, Pagosa Ranger District
Regional Foresters, Station Directors, Area Director, IITF Director, and WO staff

13.32 - “Thru:” Field for an Informal Letter

When sending informal correspondence to an individual or staff through another person or staff, type “Thru:” below the “To:” line (with the colons aligned).

13.4 - Subject Field for an Informal Letter

1. Use a short phrase that is as specific and descriptive as possible so that the recipient can readily identify the topic of the letter.
2. If responding to a previous letter, type the date of that letter (in parentheses) in the subject line after the subject (for example, “(your ltr. 5/28/12)”).
3. If it is necessary to respond a second time before receiving a reply from the first response, also refer to the date of the first response in the subject line (for example, “(your ltr. 5/28/12)(our ltr. 6/11/12)”).

13.5 - Reply-Due Field for an Informal Letter

Only the Chief, Washington Office Deputy Chiefs, and staff Directors can determine if this designation should be used on informal correspondence. Reply due dates are no less than 30 days from date of letter. See section 13.1, exhibit 01, for an example.

REPLY DUE JULY 26, 2012

13.6 - Numbering Paragraphs in an Informal Letter

There may be a need to break a paragraph into several subparagraphs. When this is done, enumeration by a sequence of numbers and letters is often helpful for clarification.

1. The enumeration of paragraphs by numbers and letters is acceptable and can be helpful as a reference aid.
 - a. Type main paragraphs in block style, single-spaced, with one blank space between them.
 - b. Subdivided paragraphs should have at least two subdivisions.
 - c. Subparagraphs should be indented.
 - d. A paragraph should begin near the end of a page only if there is space for two or more lines on that page. A paragraph should continue on the following page only if two or more lines can be carried over to that page. If one or two lines will be orphaned, take reasonable steps to shift the text in one direction or the other, to shift more text to join the orphaned lines.
2. In lengthy letters, section titles or captions may be used to increase ease of reading and reference.

Note: These instructions apply only to informal correspondence, and may be subject to change.

13.7 - Complimentary Close for an Informal Letter

There is no complimentary close for an informal letter.

14 - Multiple Signers and Recipients

14.1 - Sending a Letter Signed by More Than One Person

If the letter pertains to policy, signers must be at a comparable level in the organization, and signature blocks must be equal. For letters on other subjects, if the signers are not at the same level in the organizational structure, place the senior official's signature block before the other signers on the page.

14.2 - Responding to Letters Signed by Five People or Fewer

Separate, nearly-identical responses (with appropriate changes of address and salutation) will be sent to each individual signer, even if all are at the same location.

If only one individual, such as a Chairperson, signed on behalf of the others, then only one response needs to be sent.

(Note: If the incoming letter was signed by government officials, it must be controlled. Consult with the ORMS correspondence team, and see chapter 20.)

14.3 - Responding to Letters Signed by More Than Five People

1. If the incoming letter was signed by more than five members of the public, this type of letter may be treated as a petition or form letter. Please consult with the ORMS correspondence team to determine whether this type of letter must be controlled, and how to handle the response(s).
2. If elected officials or senior U.S. Government officials signed the incoming letter, a separate response will be provided to each person, however many there may be. (Note: Letters from government officials must be controlled. Consult with the ORMS correspondence team, and see chapter 20.)

14.4 - Responding to Letters From an Organization

If the letter is signed by an organization, and there is no individual signer, try to research an appropriate individual to whom the response can be directed. Consult the organization's Web site, or another authoritative source, to make this determination.

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If absolutely no specific individual can be identified, the response may be addressed to the organization itself.

15 - Agency-Initiated Correspondence

A variety of Agency-initiated documents, intended for signature by a higher level Agency or Department official, must be accompanied by informational or decision memorandums.

Some Documents Requiring Informational Memorandums

Awards and certificates
FACA appointments
Memorandums of understanding
Congressionally-mandated reports

Some Documents Requiring Decision Memorandums

Proclamations
FACA nominations

15.1 - Informational Memorandums


An informational memorandum is created to accompany an Agency-initiated letter submitted to a higher level Agency or Department official for signature. The informational memorandum will briefly identify the issue(s) involved and provide any pertinent information or history. See exhibit 01 for an example of an informational memorandum.

Informational memorandums, along with the material they accompany, will be controlled after the material has been reviewed and signed by all necessary Agency or Department officials. See chapter 20, section 25.81 for more information.

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15.1 – Exhibit 01

Example of an Informational Memorandum for the Secretary

	United States Department of Agriculture	Forest Service	Washington Office	1400 Independence Avenue, SW Washington, DC 20250
INFORMATIONAL MEMORANDUM FOR THOMAS J. VILSACK, SECRETARY				
THROUGH:	Harris D. Sherman <i>for</i> Under Secretary, NRE	<i>Arthur L. Taylor</i>	2-2-12	
FROM:	Thomas L. Tidwell <i>for</i> Chief	<i>Tim Dolente</i>		
SUBJECT:	Privacy Act System of Records: proposed USDA/FS-59, eCollections Point of Sale System			
<u>ISSUE:</u>				
Pursuant to the Privacy Act (5 U.S.C. 552a), the Forest Service maintains Privacy Act Systems of Records. The Forest Service is proposing to establish a new system of records. The Privacy Act requires that agencies notify the public of any proposed Privacy Act system of records.				
<u>DISCUSSION:</u>				
The Forest Service is proposing a new system of records entitled USDA/FS-59 eCollections Point of Sale System.				

15.2 - Decision Memorandums

A decision memorandum is used to provide information to a higher level Agency or Department official when a decision or approval on an issue is required. See exhibits 01 and 02 for an example of a decision memorandum.

Decision memorandums may be directed to the Forest Service Chief or Deputy Chief, or to the Secretary or Under Secretary. Decision memorandums for the Secretary are routed through the Under Secretary for Natural Resources and Environment, which will be indicated by use of the “Through” field in the document’s header. Decision memorandums for the Secretary must not include attachments that require the Secretary’s signature; attachments are informational only.

A decision memorandum will define the issue as succinctly as possible and provide information about the history of the issue, including a synopsis of significant events leading to the proposed recommendation. Decision memorandums may include other information relevant to a decision, such as the pros and cons of other options that were considered, as well as budgetary effects, the positions of other agencies, or the views of industry or other interested parties.


Decision memorandums must be reviewed and signed by all necessary officials. In the case of a memorandum for the Department, the Forest Service Chief (or someone designated on his behalf) will sign off before the memorandum leaves the Agency.

Decision memorandums for the Secretary or Under Secretary will be controlled, but only after they have been reviewed and signed by all necessary Agency and Department officials. See chapter 20, section 25.82 for more information.

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15.2 – Exhibit 01

Example of a Decision Memorandum for the Secretary

	United States Department of Agriculture	Forest Service	Washington Office	1400 Independence Avenue, SW Washington, DC 20250
DECISION MEMORANDUM FOR THOMAS J. VILSACK, SECRETARY				
THROUGH:	<i>Harris D. Sherman</i> Harris D. Sherman Under Secretary, NRE	<i>Arthur D. Kelly</i>	APR 12 2012	
FROM:	Thomas L. Tidwell Chief	<i>Thomas L. Tidwell</i>	FEB 16 2012	
SUBJECT:	Appointment of Members to the National Forest Foundation Board			
<u>ISSUE:</u>				
Members need to be appointed to fill vacancies on the National Forest Foundation Board of Directors (Board). The Board was established on November 29, 1990, and carries out the requirements of the National Forest Foundation Act of 1990 (Act) (Pub. L. 101-593), as amended.				
<u>BACKGROUND:</u>				
The National Forest Foundation is a congressionally chartered non-profit organization authorized to support the activities of the Forest Service. The purpose of the National Forest Foundation is to encourage and accept donations and gifts for the benefit of the Forest Service, conduct activities that further the purpose of the Forest Service, and increase public awareness and				

15.2 – Exhibit 02

Second Page of a Decision Memorandum for the Secretary

DECISION MEMORANDUM FOR THOMAS J. VILSACK, SECRETARY

2

A proposed slate of recommended nominees was selected and is fairly balanced in terms of points of view represented and the functions to be performed by the Board. Other selection factors included diversity, geographic location, and having the education and/or experience in natural or cultural resource management, law, or research.

When recruiting for Board participation, the National Forest Foundation also relies on appointed members' ability to raise funds or to hold positions of stature to secure support for forest stewardship work. The FACA law does not apply to the Secretary's approval of National Forest Foundation Board members, and it is recommended that the FACA process is not applied to the Board approval processes. The role of Board member is distinct from the role of Citizen Advisor, and adhering to the established FACA nomination process would hinder the National Forest Foundation's ability to nominate and appoint Board members who can meet the full requirements associated with the position.

RECOMMENDATION:

The agency carefully reviewed the nominees for the appointments on the Board and has indicated their recommendation on the enclosed slate. We recommend that you appoint the nominees whose names are listed on the enclosed slate as members of the Board.

15.3 - Executive Summaries

An executive summary is used in place of an informational memorandum for new and recurring financial reporting. The executive summary will appear on formal Agency letterhead and provide the following information: Agency name, title of report, requested by, Congressional deadline, justification with other explanation (such as delays), expected date to Congress, and a brief summary for the Secretary's review.

An executive summary will sometimes be accompanied by an informational memorandum when it has been predetermined that a report must clear the Forest Service Chief's office. Executive summaries are primarily used by the Strategic Planning, Budget, and Accountability staff for submissions for Deputy Area clearance.

15.4 - Government Accountability Office (GAO) Reports

Prior to publication, draft GAO reports are sent to the Department. The reports are controlled at the Department, then forwarded to the Agency to begin drafting a response. The response may be designated for signature at the Agency or at the Department. Drafts must be reviewed by all necessary Agency and Department officials before they are signed.

Because responses to GAO reports are controlled, ORMS needs to be involved in coordinating reviews and entering the signed copy into the electronic correspondence management system.