

## Guidelines for Category 1 and 4 Scientist Selections

### Development of a Position Description:

1. A position description (PD) for a vacant scientist (SY) position is drafted by the Research Leader (RL) with input from their Management Unit (MU), Center Director (CD) or Laboratory Director (LD). At this stage, it is important to work with your National Program Leader to address any changes in research direction that the Office of National Programs may want for the new hire. **The PD for an RL is drafted by the Center Director or Laboratory Director (CD/LD) or the Area Office when the RL reports to the Area Director.**
2. The Unit prepares an SY Recruitment Request Memo (see Appendix A). The PD and the SY Recruitment Request Memo is sent to the Management Analyst in the Area Office for final approval and submission to National Program Staff (NPS).
3. Once approved by NPS, the Unit will work with their AO to develop the necessary recruitment forms; and with Human Resources (HR) to develop a Job Opportunity announcement (JOA) to be posted on USAJobs.gov.
4. A paid advertisement is developed by the Unit and submitted to Human Resources (HR) for approval. (Appendix B) **For RL positions, the paid advertisement is developed by the CD and/or Area Office depending on who serves as the supervisor for the position.** (Not required, but highly recommended)

### Search Committee Composition and Functions:

The main functions of the Search Committee are to identify potential candidates and invite them to apply for the vacant position. Committee members must have diverse backgrounds.

The Search Committee is generally composed of but not limited to:

1. Committee Chair designated by the Center Director, Laboratory Director or Research Leader. **In the case of an RL that reports to the Area Office, an Associate Area Director will chair the Committee.**
2. A senior SY (GS-14/15)
3. A junior SY (GS-12/13)
4. Stakeholder
5. University Representative (Collocated sites)
6. National Program Leader
7. Area Outreach Specialist

The Search Committee ensures the vacancy announcement is:

1. Advertised in the appropriate scientific venues, discipline-specific journals and within underrepresented populations (1890 Universities, American Indian Colleges, and similar).
2. The Committee identifies and contacts (email, phone call or letter) potential qualified candidates, inviting applicants to apply; and can provide relevant information about ARS and the research program of interest.

3. The Area Outreach Specialist can provide resources/contacts to assist with reaching underrepresented populations.
4. The Committee must document when and where the position is advertised and their attempts to diversify the candidate pool.

### **Evaluation Panel Composition and Functions:**

The make-up of the Evaluation Panel should differ from the Search Committee. Panel members must have diverse backgrounds, with the panel majority from ARS. It is recommended that the panel include members from a different Unit/Location or Area Office. The Evaluation Panel should have access to the position description, the job announcement, and candidates' credentials (CV, cover letter, etc.). The Area Outreach Specialist should be included as an advisor & non-voting member on the Category (CAT) 1 and 4 positions. The Evaluation Panel drafts all interview questions and criteria worksheets prior to interviews, and the Area Outreach Specialist must approve these documents. **The Selecting Official should not be part of the Evaluation Panel or participate in the Panel Interview process, including asking follow-up questions. However, they may observe the process as a silent observer.**

The Evaluation Panel is comprised of but not limited to:

1. A Panel Chair for a scientist vacancy is appointed by the Selecting Official, and should be either an RL, Lead Scientist, or senior SY (GS-14/15). **In the case of an RL that reports to the Area Office, an Associate Area Director will be the Panel Chair. Similarly, for an RL that reports to a Center Director, the Panel chair should be another CD, Associate Area Director, or Senior RL.** (No panel member can be in the chain of command or supervised by the vacant position.)
2. Junior SY (GS-12/13) **In the case of RL, Senior SY.**
3. Stakeholder
4. University Representative in collocated sites (Dean, Department Head or designated)
5. Technician
6. Experienced AO or PSA (can be from a different location or area)
7. Area Outreach Specialist (non-voting member)

### **Role of the Panel Chair:**

1. Lead the Panel in developing interview questions and evaluation criteria based on the qualification requirements outlined in the vacancy announcement and the identified required competencies of the position.
2. Maintain a record of the interview questions that are provided to the Selecting Official and send to the Area Outreach Specialist for approval.
3. Convene the Evaluation Panel and lead a preliminary interview or evaluation of the candidates based on written applications or virtual interviews to determine who to interview if needed.
4. Contact and set up interviews with selected candidates based on the preliminary interview/evaluation. **The Selecting Official and panel must interview a minimum of three if there are three or more on the cert.** (Area guidance regarding SY positions.)
5. Provide a short biography of each candidate to all interested staff/stakeholders.

6. Invite unit/location employees, collaborators, key partners, and stakeholders to attend the presentation made by the candidates.
7. Create a feedback form to distribute to partners and stakeholders who participate in the seminar sessions. Collect feedback forms and summarize results to provide to the Selecting Official.
8. Document the interview process, generate a memo for the Selecting Official detailing the strengths and weaknesses of each candidate, and discuss the outcome of the report with the Selecting Official

**Role of the Evaluation Panel:**

1. Conduct interviews and document candidate qualifications based on evaluation criteria.
2. Document the strengths and weaknesses of the candidates and identify highly qualified candidates for referral to the Selecting Official.

**Certification of Eligible Candidates:**

Candidate certifications are usually received from HR within 15 days after the vacancy announcement closes. The Selecting Official will have access to a copy of the application package of each qualified candidate. The Selecting Official will download the certificate from USAStaffing and provide the PDF to the Panel Chair; ensuring that **PII is protected by either redacting the application materials to remove PII or emailing the package password protected with the password in a separate email.** The Panel Chair will provide a copy of the application documents to the members of the Evaluation Panel.

**Short Listed candidates:**

If a large group of certified candidates is received, the Evaluation Panel can narrow the pool to a short list (four to six candidates) by reviewing the CV and conducting virtual or phone pre-interviews and reduce the candidate number down to those who will receive on-site interviews. Before the virtual interviews, the Panel will compile a list of interview questions and send to the Area Outreach Specialist for approval, who should also take part in these initial interviews. Interviews should last a standardized length (i.e., 30, 60 minutes, etc.). Panel members will ask questions as well as any impromptu follow-up questions and discussion. Allow time for the candidate to ask questions at the end of the interview.

**On-Site/Virtual Interviews:**

The Evaluation Panel will conduct on-site or virtual interviews with at least three selected candidates if there are 3 or more on the cert. These interviews will be coordinated by the Unit/location. Interview components should minimally include: Candidate seminar (~45 minutes) and discussion/Q&A (15 minutes). For a scientist position, the official inviting candidates for on-site/virtual interviews should provide guidance that the seminar should demonstrate scientific capabilities, including vision for science. **For RL positions, the seminar should also include the candidates' vision for leadership within the Unit, as well as their research background.** Any candidates who are onsite CANNOT attend any other candidates' seminars.

1. Individual or group meeting(s) with Unit staff. (Unit staff that are part of the panel, or applicants, cannot attend this session)
2. Interview with Evaluation Panel with pre-drafted questions that are approved by the Area Outreach Specialist, who will also take part in this interview. If questions were used to prescreen candidates, a different set of questions should be used for the on-site interview.
3. Feedback from staff attending sessions with the candidates throughout the day should be collected and forwarded to the Selecting Official.
4. At co-located sites; a meeting with University Faculty, Department Head, and/or Dean.
5. Tour of facilities or virtual tour (video or similar)

#### **Evaluation Panel Recommendations:**

The Selecting Official will check references for the candidates after the interviews. A final meeting of the Evaluation Panel will follow the interviews to evaluate candidates. The chair and/or panel will provide a summary report/recommendation memo to the selecting official. The report to the Selecting Official includes:

1. A summary of the process and outcome, including each panel members summary rankings for each candidate, summary of strengths and weaknesses for each candidate and panel recommendation of suitability or unsuitability of each candidate.
2. A list of the committee members & affiliation.
3. The CV and Bio of each suitable candidate.
4. All documentation/notes/email correspondence about recommendation or candidates will be collected and sent to the Selecting Official to be retained for three years per recommendations by the Office of the General Counsel.

#### **Final Selection:**

The Selecting Official will make a candidate selection and discuss with the Area Director (AD). An official Selection Memo will be sent to the AD (Appendix C) for approval. When approval for the selection is received from the AD, the tentative unofficial offer will be made by the Selecting Official. Human Resources (HR) will make official contact for both the tentative and the official job offer. **In the case of RLs, approval from the Associate Administrator of Research Operations is required before the Selecting Official can proceed with a tentative offer.** Special Agency Check (SAC) is needed for positions at BSL-3 labs or those that require a Tier 2 background investigation; the SAC is initiated by HR. Once the SAC is complete, a final written offer will be made to the candidate by HR.

**Non-selected candidates:** non-selected candidates are notified by HR after the selected candidate onboards.

#### **Grade Determination:**

HR will conduct an Ad Hoc Review for positions at the GS-13 and above level.

#### **Selecting Official for:**

1. SYs: RL of the Management Unit.
2. RLs: CD or the Area Director when the RL reports to the Area Office.

**Appendix A**  
**SY Recruitment Request Form**

DATE

SUBJECT: SY Recruitment Approval Request

TO: Program Analyst  
Office of the Associate Administrator  
Office of National Programs

FROM: Alberto Pantoja  
Director, Midwest Area

**Position Number:**

**Location:**

**Title, Series, Grade, Category:**

NEW     VICE    NAME:

**Associated Project No(s), Title, and National Program(s):**

**New Program Increase Funds?**     Yes     No

**Program Increase Title and Year:**

**Comments on Financial Impact of Recruitment:**

**Other Comments/Information:**

**Provide fiscal information for current year and next two FYs in the format below.**

	IF POSITION IS FILLED	IF POSITION IS NOT FILLED
	# SY in Unit	# SY in Unit
	\$/SY in Unit	\$/SY in Unit
FY 22	\$	\$
FY 23	\$	\$

FY 24	\$	\$
	<b>Unit Discretionary \$/SY</b>	<b>Unit Discretionary \$/SY</b>
FY 22	\$	\$
FY 23	\$	\$
FY 24	\$	\$
	<b>\$/SY in Project</b>	<b>\$/SY in Project</b>
FY 22	\$	\$
FY 23	\$	\$
FY 24	\$	\$
	<b>Project Discretionary \$/SY</b>	<b>Project Discretionary \$/SY</b>
FY 22	\$	\$
FY 23	\$	\$
FY 24	\$	\$

\*use NTL

Discussion with DA required

**ONP Recommended Action:**

- Approved for Recruitment
- Approved with Changes as Indicated
- Required Revisions; Resubmit for Review and Approval
- Not Approved for Recruitment:
  - Hold for potential placement of ARS Scientist (Area Director Notified)*
  - Initiate directed reassignment of Scientist name below (Area Director Notified)*

SY Name: \_\_\_\_\_

**NPL & DA Comments:**

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NPL Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

DA Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix B**



**TITLE OF POSITION**  
**GS-SERIES AND GRADE**  
Salary Range of \$\_\_ to \$\_\_

**Announcement Open: \_\_ through \_\_**

The USDA, ARS is seeking a \_\_\_\_ to serve as Research Leader of the \_\_\_\_ Research Unit (Unit Acronym) in CITY, STATE. The mission of the Unit is \_\_\_\_.

**U.S. Citizenship is required.** For further information and complete application instructions, go to the USAJobs Web site: <https://www.usajobs.gov/> and refer to announcement number \_\_\_\_\_. Applications must be received by the closing date of DATE JA CLOSES.

Contacts: Application procedure: HR SPECIALIST NAME, EMAIL AND PHONE  
Scientific information: NAME OF SELECTING OFFICIAL, EMAIL, PHONE

**USDA/ARS is an equal opportunity employer and provider**

YOUR REQUEST TO USE THE ABOVE ADVERTISEMENT IS APPROVED.

NAME OF HR SPECIALIST  
Human Resources Specialist

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date



**Appendix C**

DATE

SUBJECT: Selection of Scientist or Research Leader

TO: Area Director  
Midwest Area

FROM: First Name/Last Name, Title

We recently advertised a vacant Category 1 scientist position or RL (**PD#, Title of Position**). We received a Certificate of Eligible from HR with **Number of Applicants**. An evaluation panel was formed to evaluate the applicants. The panel chair was **NAME**. The evaluation panel composition is described in an attached document. Please find attached the criteria developed by the panel to evaluate the applicants and a letter from **NAME**, MWA ODEO Program Manager. **Name of ODEO Program Manager**, consulted on the composition of the panel and observed the interviews and post interview discussion. The panel interviewed **number of candidates**.

With your approval, I would like to select **NAME** for this position. The decision is based on the ratings and the discussion with the evaluation panel, my own evaluation of the application packages and information provided by references. **SELECTEE** was unanimously rated higher than the other applicants by the panel. The references were resoundingly positive. I also received unsolicited positive recommendations from a number of **UNIVERSITY REPS OR STAKEHOLDERS** who are long standing collaborators in this projects work. **SELECTEE** has **## OF** peer-reviewed publications. She/He is also very experienced in **AREA OF EXPERTISE**, which make them uniquely qualified. The evaluation panel, the references, the stakeholders and I all believe that **SELECTEE** is the best candidate for the job and will be highly successful.

Enclosures:

Scoring Criteria  
Panel Composition  
ODEO Manager Email  
Curriculum Vitae