

U.S. Office of Personnel Management
Office of Merit Systems Oversight and Effectiveness
Classification Appeals and FLSA Programs

Dallas Oversight Division
1100 Commerce Street, Room 4C22
Dallas, TX 75242-9968

Classification Appeal Decision
Under section 5112 of title 5, United States Code

Appellant: [appellant's name]

Agency classification: Economist
GS-110-13

Organization: [appellant's activity]
U.S. Geological Survey
Department of the Interior
[geographic location]

OPM decision: Economist
GS-110-13

OPM decision number: C-0110-13-01

/s/ Bonnie J. Brandon

Bonnie J. Brandon
Classification Appeals Officer

October 30, 2000

Date

As provided in section 511.612 of title 5, Code of Federal Regulations, this decision constitutes a certificate that is mandatory and binding on all administrative, certifying, payroll, disbursing, and accounting officials of the government. The agency is responsible for reviewing its classification decisions for identical, similar, or related positions to ensure consistency with this decision. There is no right of further appeal. This decision is subject to discretionary review only under conditions and time limits specified in the *Introduction to the Position Classification Standards*, appendix 4, section G (address provided in appendix 4, section H).

Decision sent to:

Appellant:

[appellant's name and address]

Agency:

[personnel office]

Director of Personnel
U.S. Department of the Interior
Mail Stop 5221
1849 C Street, NW.
Washington, DC 20240

Introduction

On June 21, 2000, the Dallas Oversight Division of the U.S. Office of Personnel Management accepted a classification appeal from [the appellant]. The appellant's position is currently classified as Economist, GS-110-13. The position is assigned to the [appellant's activity], U.S. Geological Survey, Department of the Interior, [geographic location]. The appellant believes that his position is undergraded and should more properly be evaluated by applying the Economist, GS-110, position classification standard instead of the Research Grade Evaluation Guide that was used by his agency. We have accepted and decided this appeal under section 5112 of title 5, United States Code.

To help decide the appeal, an Oversight Division representative interviewed the appellant and his immediate supervisor. Both the appellant and his supervisor agree that the appellant's position description of record, position [number], accurately describes the appellant's work assignment.

Position information

The [appellant's activity] is a major research center of [a specific Region] of the Biological Resources Division. The Division provides Federal and State management agencies and other partner organizations with data, research support, and research results that pertain to the nation's biological resources. The Division's research activities help the Department to carry out its biotic and renewable resource trust responsibilities. The [appellant's activity] staff is composed of resource professionals, such as hydrologists, ecologists, terrestrial and aquatic wildlife biologists, and is a major national source of social science and economics expertise within the Division.

The [specific] Section conducts research on ecosystem management with a focus on the human impact on wildlife resource declines and contingent restoration activities. The Section is composed of a team of research social scientists. The appellant works as one of two professional economists who participate with other self-directed interdisciplinary professionals in examining critical local, regional, and national ecosystem management problems, issues, and concerns.

The appellant's research focuses on specific natural resource allocation problems and conflicts centered around wildlife species and their habitats and the values attributable to wildlife and habitats by the public. The appellant identifies the economic research needs of resource managers, describes the research required to meet those needs, writes study plans for submission to peer review and incorporates peer reviewer comments, plans research tasks, directs the work of others in completing planned research, and writes final study reports.

Series, title, and standard determination

The appellant applies a professional knowledge of economics in conducting research, analyzing economic data, and preparing interpretative reports. The appellant provides technical economic advice and consultation to a variety of governmental entities. The appealed position is properly included in the GS-110 Economist Series and is titled *Economist*.

Both the agency and the appellant agree that the appellant does applied research in economics as well as provides consultation and technical assistance within [the appellant's activity] and to other Federal, State, and local governmental entities. The appellant believes that his position should be evaluated using the standard for the Economist Series, GS-110. The agency contends that the Research Grade Evaluation Guide (RGEG) is more appropriate, since the appellant does applied economic research.

The RGEG is intended for use in determining grade levels of basic and applied research positions. However, it is *not* intended for use in classifying positions involving basic or applied research in social sciences like economics. The RGEG specifically excludes economic research positions. This exclusion should not be construed as implying less concern for the impact of the appellant on the dimensions of his position. Instead, the exclusion of economic research reflects a lack of fit of the specific criteria in the RGEG for social science positions. The GS-110 standard evaluates economist positions based on the relative differences in research and analysis, program planning and administration, and consultant and advisory services. The appellant's economic research work is best evaluated by application of the criteria in the GS-110 Economist standard.

Grade determination

The GS-110 standard provides five factors for the evaluation of all economist positions. Those factors are *scope of assignment*, *technical complexity*, and *technical, administrative, and policy responsibilities*.

Factor 1, Scope of assignment

This factor considers the size and scope of assigned studies and programs.

At the GS-12 level, economists perform multiple diverse studies requiring considerable planning and coordination. Economist assignments at the GS-12 level include the full scope of the research process, from the initiation of investigations and planning of methods through the interpretation of findings and the preparation of final reports. GS-12 economists, however, are limited to coordinating and completing their assigned studies.

The appellant's assignments are more typical of the GS-13 level, where the increasing scope of the research coincides with deeper probing into economic phenomena. Assignments at the GS-13 level are difficult to define, require sophisticated research technique, or may involve the development of new or unconventional methods or approaches. Economists at this level independently initiate, formulate, plan, execute, coordinate, and complete their research studies. The distinguishing feature about assignments at the GS-13 level is that they are made in terms of problems, and the economist at this level is responsible for originating the study plan, coordinating the execution of the project, and making the conclusions that represent the solution.

The scope of the appellant's assignments meets the GS-13 level. A primary focus of the appellant's economic research is in the development of valuation procedures for wildlife and wildlife habitats. He conducts and/or reviews research on nonmarket instream flow benefits and

develops ways to compute the nonmarket values and benefits to fishery resources and aquatic habitats. He provides technical assistance on policy issues that focus on nonmarket versus market benefits of water resources. As contemplated for GS-13 economists, the appellant's assignments require him to independently identify economic problems, design studies that address the problems identified, and, after peer review and management approval, carry them out and reach conclusions about problem solutions.

At the GS-14 level, assignments typically involve either several programs of a size similar to the appellant's or a broad and general responsibility for a particular area of economic activity, such as important facets of international trade or labor law. Assignments at this level involve the formulation, programming, and guidance of projects or continuing programs of great importance and significance. Economists at this level are expected to provide authoritative knowledge about a large, complex, and critical area of the Government's economic activity. The appellant's scope of assignment does not reach the GS-14 level.

Factor 2, Technical complexities

This factor takes into account the degree of creativity and imagination necessary, the number of relationships and the subtlety of the variables involved, the adequacy of established methods and techniques, and the availability of data.

The appellant's position matches the criteria of grade GS-13, where complexities may require considerable originality and ingenuity to adapt, extend, and synthesize existing theory, principle, or technique into new patterns. Some GS-13 level economists develop and apply new techniques and original methods. Unprecedented aspects are usually present and auxiliary research studies are often required before the solution to the initial problem can be developed. The appellant's overall research work calls for such creativity as described at GS-13. For example, the appellant's valuation research parallels the technical complexities envisioned at the GS-13 level. His research involves innovative applications of standard techniques, and his accomplishments are recognized as breaking new and fertile ground in the area of nonmarket value economics.

The appellant's work does not reach grade GS-14 where there may be frequent need for invention of new methods in the context of a scarcity of applicable precedent, pertinent literature, or proved methodology. While the appellant's economic research may demand modification or development of methods, it is not against a background of theory and technique that is nearly without helpful suggestions. The complexities of the appellant's assignments do not include the requirement for him to formulate and guide major research attacks on problems of great difficulty and critical importance as contemplated at the GS-14 level.

Factor 3, Technical responsibility

This factor covers the degree to which employees are held accountable for such functions as the statement of the economic problem and development of an hypothesis; effectiveness of the planning, accuracy of economic facts, and adequacy of the economic analysis; and validity of economic interpretations and the significance of the findings.

At the GS-13 level, there is a marked degree of professional independence and technical authority that demonstrates a high order of professional competence regarding accuracy and critical evaluation. Like economists at the GS-13 level, the appellant works with considerable independence. For example, he is responsible for the complete economic study from initial assignment through final product. Using only very general agency guidelines, he determines the most appropriate methods and presentation style. The appellant's technical responsibility fully meets the GS-13 level.

At the GS-14 level, economists are expected to locate and explore the most fruitful areas of research in relation to their agency's programs, formulate the research plan, and provide supporting data for the proposed solution. The appellant does not function at this level because his research proposals are reviewed and approved by agency management before the research is initiated.

Factor 4, Administrative responsibility

This factor covers the extent the employee is responsible for the allocation of agency resources that are reflected in decisions about the selection of economic studies, data sources including primary sources, techniques for data processing and analysis, and methods of presentation of findings.

At the GS-13 level, the economist is responsible for identifying, defining, and selecting *specific* problems for study and for determining the most fruitful investigations to undertake. The appellant is accountable for the soundness of value judgments reflected in recommendations relative to proposed studies, changes in technical procedures and regulations, alteration in the direction of programmed research, and matters of similar difficulty and importance. The appellant's administrative responsibility meets GS-13.

At the GS-14 level, the economist locates and explores the most fruitful *areas* of research in relation to the agency's programs and needs and develops and presents budget recommendations to support these plans. Neither the breadth nor scope of administrative responsibility found at the GS-14 level is inherent in the appellant's narrower assignment.

Factor 5, Policy responsibility

This factor covers the extent to which the economist's advice and consultation may affect Government action with respect to the economy of the nation, a large sector of the population, an important segment of the national budget, an important non-economic policy of the Federal government or other matters of such importance.

At the GS-12 level, economists rarely are responsible for making policy recommendations. At the GS-13 level, however, the decisions of the economist are occasionally used in arriving at policy decisions affecting important aspects of the nation's economy. The appellant's assignment parallels that anticipated at the GS-13 level in that his studies are published and used by government officials to arrive at policy decisions. The appellant's policy responsibilities do

not meet the GS-14 level, since he does not serve as an authoritative technical advisor in the *highest* councils of the Federal government.

Summary

Since all five grading factors of the Economist standard are properly evaluated as GS-13, the appropriate grade for the appellant's position is GS-13.

Decision

The appellant's position is properly classified as Economist, GS-110-13.