



United States Department of Agriculture

Departmental
Management

Office of the
Assistant Secretary
for Administration

Office of Human
Resources
Management

1400 Independence
Avenue, SW
Washington, DC
20250

December 31, 2013

Mr. Timothy Curry
U.S. Office of Personnel Management
1900 E Street, NW
Washington, DC 20415

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Tim".

Dear Mr. Curry:

This letter transmits the preliminary FY 2013 Metrics Report for the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Labor-Management Forum. This report is submitted in furtherance of the requirements of the Executive Order 13522 – *Creating Labor-Management Forums to Improve Delivery of Government Services*, and in compliance with guidance from the National Council on Federal Labor-Management Relations (National Council).

Any questions or comments on this submission should be forwarded to Mr. Bryan Knowles via email at Bryan.Knowles@dm.usda.gov or telephone at (202) 720-6784.

We look forward to the National Council's review of USDA's report.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Billy".

William P. Milton, Jr.
Chief Human Capital Officer

Enclosure

**United States Department of Agriculture
Labor-Management Forum
Preliminary Metric Progress Report
December 31, 2013**

I. Introduction

Executive Order (EO) 13522, “*Creating Labor Management Forums to Improve Delivery of Government Services*” calls for the establishment of forums through which labor and management will collaborate for the purpose of delivering “... *the highest quality of services to the American people.*” In order to evaluate the efficacy of labor-management collaborations in improving government efficiency, the EO requires the application of metrics to the work of forums. Agency-level forums within the U.S. Department of Agriculture (“USDA” or “Department”) were tasked with submitting fiscal year (FY) 2013 metrics reports to the USDA’s Employee and Labor Relations Division (ELRD) within the Office of Human Resources Management by February 28, 2013, to be followed by the monthly submission of progress reports throughout the year. Because FY 2013 Labor-Management (L-M) Forum Metrics Progress Reports must be reviewed and approved by both labor and management forum members prior to submission, and given that there are 65 individual forums participating in metrics across the Department, not all forum progress reports have been received for analysis by the Department. Consequently, this report is preliminary and comprises the findings obtained from the progress reports received to date for FY 2013.

II. Metric Reports Summary

- 81** Total number of metrics-eligible bargaining units
- 65** Total number of bargaining units currently participating in metrics
- 16** Total number of bargaining units not currently participating in metrics

To date, labor and management have created 49 subordinate forums throughout the USDA. Nine (9) forums continue to be comprised of multiple bargaining units, and all of the USDA’s mission areas hosted forums during FY 2013. Forums now cover 36,889 of the approximately 37,440 bargaining unit employees within USDA, leaving only 551 bargaining unit employees not covered by a forum, as opposed to last year’s total of 3,028. As a positive consequence, total percentile of bargaining unit employees covered by forums has increased more than 6%, to 98.5% from last year’s total of 92.4%.

III. Progress of Forums

A. LABOR-MANAGEMENT RELATIONSHIP METRIC

Based on the FY 2013 metric reports received to date, many of the forums are reporting steady progress towards reaching their respective goals for this first metric. A common response from the forums has been the success in the use of the pre-decisional involvement (PDI) process to resolve many of the challenges posed in budget shortfalls and lapse of appropriations scenarios. Individual metric highlights for FY 2013 include:

- In order to recognize the varied contributions, achievements, good deeds and talents of employees across the agency, Labor and Management jointly developed the Plant Protection and Quarantine (PPQ) Spotlight Initiative to improve employee satisfaction. To that end, the employee and/or group chosen for spot lighting is featured in a special employee quarterly newsletter created by the Spotlight Committee called "The PPQ Spotlight." The newsletter features articles explaining why the employee/group was nominated and their accomplishments. (APHIS-PPQ, NAAE and NAPPQOSE)
- In an effort to expand the collaborative labor management relationship, Labor and Management jointly developed and presented six (6) webinars on Interest Based Bargaining (IBB). This training was jointly delivered to 120 participants which included managers and union representatives. The training presentation was also recorded for AgLearn¹ so future PPQ managers and union representatives may obtain the same training without delay or additional cost. (APHIS-PPQ, NAAE and NAPPQOSE)
- In an effort to improve the labor management relationship at field locations, Labor and Management established a goal to improve Pre-Decisional Involvement (PDI) opportunities during 2013. The baseline was five (5) PDI opportunities in 2012 and a goal of ten (10) for 2013. The Forum exceeded its goal by recording 25 PDI solicitations at the field level alone for 2013. (APHIS-PPQ, NAAE and NAPPQOSE)
- In an effort to expand the collaborative labor management relationship, Labor and Management successfully engaged in and completed 28 separate PDI initiatives during 2013, ranging from telework policy to cross training. (Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) and AFGE, Council 200)

Again, the majority of subordinate forums reporting affirm that they continue to make significant progress even though some individual forums have not met all of their annual goals for the Labor-Management Relationship Metric.

¹ The Agriculture Learning (AgLearn) system is USDA's department-wide system for managing training records and activity at USDA and directly supports the Presidential eGovernment initiative for e-Training. USDA employees and partners use AgLearn to search, access, enroll in, and record all training opportunities through the web, any time, any place. Learning opportunities in AgLearn include both online resources, such as courses, webinars, videos and books, as well as registration in traditional, instructor-led training.

B. EMPLOYEE SATISFACTION & ENGAGEMENT METRIC

To achieve the goals of the Employee Satisfaction & Engagement Metric, several forums concentrated efforts on improving effective communications between labor and management. Individual metric highlights during 2013 include:

- In response to the 2012 Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey results, the Food, Nutrition and Consumer Services (FNCS) initiated listening sessions and, with union participation and assistance, established working groups to analyze and recommend action based on the feedback received at the listening sessions across the country. The listening sessions were organized around four targeted topics: communication; leadership; employee training/development, and employee empowerment/engagement. (FNCS, NTEU and AFGE)
- FNCS stood up a Diversity Leaders Council to provide ongoing recommendations to their Senior Leadership with specific emphasis on workforce diversity and inclusion: identifying workforce barriers and strategies; addressing measurement and evaluation; communication and outreach, and training and development. The unions recommended several bargaining unit employees for participation on this body. (FNCS, NTEU and AFGE)
- FNCS and NTEU were extended the privilege of sharing their negotiated Pilot Program to expand telework with the National Council on Federal Labor-Management Relations in November 2013. The Pilot eliminates the Agency's six (6) day maximum amount for telework and permits participating employees the ability to telework seven (7) to ten (10) days per pay period. (FNCS and NTEU)
- In order to improve open communication, Labor and Management jointly developed a goal for FY 2013 of requiring all Rural Development (RD) supervisors within the Centralized Servicing Center (CSC) to hold regular staff meetings at least once every quarter in each unit, and section-wide meetings at least twice per year. While not every unit met the goal for 2013, the Forum jointly concurred that the level of communications between management and staff has improved substantially during FY 2013. (RD-CSC and AFGE, Local 3354)
- In order to increase the number of employees participating in the telework program, Labor and Management within RD's Montana State Office jointly developed a plan to determine the reasons for the lack of participation and develop a strategy to actively promote the benefits of teleworking to all employees. As a result, 100% of eligible employees had either an *Ad hoc* or core telework agreement in place at the end of FY 2013. (RD-Montana and AFGE, Local 1585)
- In order to increase grade mobility opportunities for employees, Labor and Management jointly developed a mentorship and job shadowing program. As a result, the Forum met its goal of ten (10) employees being selected for promotion to higher graded positions within the Guaranteed Loan Section during FY 2013. (RD-CSC and AFGE Local 3354)

- In order to establish a baseline for assessing employee satisfaction for AMS Grading and Verification Branch employees, Labor and Management jointly elected as a goal to develop and undertake an employee satisfaction and morale survey for all branch employees by the close of FY 2013. The Forum achieved their goal, and discovered the average satisfaction score was well above the average (3.5 out of a possible 5). (AMS and AFGE, Council 200)

A review of FY 2013 progress reports received to date suggests that where the parties have been successful in improving communications and addressing work life issues, there is improved morale and a perception of increased responsiveness on the part of management by employees.

C. MISSION & SERVICE DELIVERY METRIC

A review of FY 2013 reports for the Mission and Service Delivery metric continues to indicate that this particular metric is often left unaddressed by the parties. However, where forums have addressed the Mission and Service Delivery metric, they report labor-management cooperation in addressing important mission accomplishment issues. Individual metric highlights during 2013 include:

- In order to reduce processing time, Labor and Management jointly identified the PPQ Medical Monitoring Program as an inefficient process which could be updated to save costs and establish consistency across the Agency. Consequently, the parties formed a joint working group which focused on developing and finalizing a Field Operations Guidance document outlining consistent procedures when medical monitoring testing was being requested. As a result, the union-management work group was not only able to streamline ordering procedures, but also produced substantial cost savings for the Agency as well. (APHIS-PPQ, NAAE and NAPPQOSE)
- Determined to increase automation while improving work quality, Labor and Management worked together to jointly develop strategies for reducing customer phone call hold times and improving “Average Speed of Answer” (ASA) by 10% during FY 2013. As a result of these joint efforts, RD-CSC was able to achieve an average ASA of just 2 minutes and 51 seconds per call – a 46% improvement in ASA time as compared to FY 2012. Additionally, the Interactive Voice Response was completely revamped resulting in an increased customer usage of more than 40% as compared to FY 2012. (RD-CSC and AFGE Local 3354)
- In order to increase automation to improve work quality, Labor and Management jointly developed an “Acceptable Quality Level” data base to track grading scores of all supervisory audits at each facility. As a result, in FY 2013, each supervisor was provided an excel tracking sheet to record the grading facilities AQL data on a monthly basis. In addition, the data is currently being tabulated to track and asses overall grading results for 2013. (AMS and AFGE Council 200)

- In an effort to streamline operations and increase the delivery of services, Management working with the Union successfully navigated a major restructuring of FNCS Regional Offices which involved: the closure of several small field offices; creation of the Retail Operations Division by merging retail operations functions previously embedded across regional offices; creation and staffing of Team Leads (Senior Program Specialists) in each region (a total of approximately 70 positions) and abolition of Branch Chief positions. (FNCS, NTEU and AFGE)
- In order to improve customer service within the Farm Services Administration (FSA), Management and the Union noted that 46% of current employees had never received skills training for public responsiveness, problem resolution, customer service or similar topics. The Parties employed the use of management conference calls to educate and empower employees to increase customer service skill sets. Training includes best practices, success stories from the field and education on available resources to aide employees in their day-to-day roles and responsibilities. (FSA and AFGE Local 1585)

The substantive issues that agencies and their unions are collaborating on continue to hold significant promise for improving how agencies and staff offices accomplish their respective missions.

D. NON-PARTICIPATING BARGAINING UNITS

There remains 16 bargaining units that currently are not participating in the forum/metrics process, and three (3) bargaining units that, while participating in a forum that conduct PDI, are still working on developing metrics and governance documents. The following are the most prevalent explanations provided by the parties representing these units as to why they choose not to participate in a forum:

- Labor and management are working on setting up their forum and/or developing metrics but require additional time to address obstacles;
- The labor-management relationship is working well and the union sees no added value to the forum/metrics process; and,
- Labor and Management are unable to establish a forum due to irreconcilable differences maintained by one party.

The Department continues to instruct subordinate agency and staff office Labor Relations Officers to continue engaging and working with their labor counterparts in order to bring more of the bargaining units under the EO LM forum process. The on-going success of these efforts is reflected in the number of bargaining units currently participating in forums and metrics, including tri-partite forums (e.g., FNCS, NTEU and AFGE Local 2735; Foreign Agricultural Service, AFSCME Local 3976 and AFSA; and APHIS-PPQ, NAAE and NAPPQOSE).

IV. Conclusion

With 49 forums having been created covering approximately 99% of its union organized workforce, USDA is making significant strides towards complete implementation of the EO. Though work remains to be done, there can be no doubt that measurable progress is being made within USDA to improve the labor-management relationship. Where the parties have addressed mission accomplishment, they are involved in substantial work with positive, cost effective impacts to the Federal government. The USDA Labor Relations Program within the ELRD will continue to work with all of its subordinate forums to establish measurable, objective, and achievable goals within the defined EO metrics. Correspondingly, individual forums will continue to work, adjust, and revise their action plans, just as labor-management parties will continue their efforts to bring more bargaining units under the EO.