



NWS “evolution” may result in Position Downgrades

(October 12, 2016) A number of bargaining unit employees appear to be under the misimpression that the recently announced plans to “evolve” or restructure the NWS will not result in downgrades. No such promise has been made by NWS management. In fact, during the September 29 Webinar with employees, the NWS Deputy Director merely stated that “my **gut reaction** is that pay grades are not going to be lower.”

Indeed, the NWS is not in a position to make such promises, inasmuch as the grades of positions are determined by position classifiers outside the NWS, based on complex and ambiguous OPM classification standards. When duties of an employee’s position are eroded, his or her position is subject to reclassification and downgrade. In such a case, the employee is entitled to retain his or her grade for two years, and then he or she is entitled to pay retention thereafter. While on pay retention, the employee is only entitled to one-half of the pay annual pay increase of the maximum rate of the position he or she now holds. Although an employee affected by a position downgrade receives a partial reprieve from the full financial impacts of the downgrade, the employee still loses out on future step increases they would have received, as well as half of all future annual pay increases. Over time, this adds up to a major financial hit, and also reduces the employee’s “high-three” salary used to calculate their retirement pension. The workforce as a whole is also adversely affected because there are fewer higher graded positions to which employees can be promoted over the course of their careers.

There is a clear precedent for positions downgrades in the NWS. Prior to the Modernization and Associated Restructuring (“MAR”) of the 1990s, there were eight “Category 1” Forecast Offices that had greater forecasting responsibilities than the other 44 Forecast Offices, and the Lead and General Forecasters at those eight offices were classified as GS-14 and GS-13 respectively. During the MAR, the forecasting responsibilities at the Category I Forecast Offices were reduced as the forecasting responsibilities of all the WFOs were made more uniform. As a result, the GS-14 and GS-13 positions at the Category I Forecast Offices were downgraded to the GS-13 and GS-12 grades.

During the September 29 Webinar, the Deputy Director said that “in the next few years . . . you may focus on different activities than you do today . . . Some positions may go away, others will be created.” In referring to the future role of the Hydrological Meteorological Technicians, the Deputy Director said that “likely some activities that we’re doing today, we won’t need to do in the future because of technological advances.” When asked by an HMT what role he would play in the future, she responded “I take it back to the individual that asked this question . . . how do you see yourself a part of the evolving Weather Service, and what critical role are you playing?” When asked whether the NWS is planning to consolidate the warning functions to national centers, the NWS’s Chief Operating Officer replied, “we wouldn’t be doing our jobs if we weren’t looking at everything. . . . Everything’s on the table.”

Therefore, employees are encouraged to review their position descriptions, identify which duties will no longer be performed by the WFOs in the “evolved” NWS, and make their own independent judgments about whether their positions may be downgraded.

-NWSEO-

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