



USDA Climate Hubs Fellows Program



PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

USDA Climate Hubs Fellows Program (CHFP)

This issuance establishes USDA's Climate Hubs Fellows Program (CHFP). The mission of the U.S. Department of Agriculture Regional Hubs for Risk Adaptation and Mitigation to Climate Change (Climate Hubs) is to develop and deliver science-based, region-specific information and technologies to agricultural and natural resource managers that enable climate-smart decision-making, and to provide access to assistance that will enable land managers to implement those decisions.

This program provides the authority to hire and provide technical and scientific experts ("Tier II" Candidates GS-12 to GS-13) the opportunity to enhance their professional skills in the public arena and to be brought into developmental positions to gain exposure to careers in the mission areas of USDA and that of the USDA Climate Hubs.

It also offers opportunities for highly talented and diverse individuals ("Tier I" Candidates; GS-2 to GS-11 range) to be brought into developmental positions to gain exposure to careers in the mission areas of USDA, while developing talent to fill specialty/program occupations. As described in greater detail below, the CHFP at the "Tier II" level provides opportunities for individuals who have completed masters and doctorate degrees to broaden their professional career experience in specialty areas within USDA's mission space. At the "Tier I" level, the CHFP provides an opportunity for individuals who have completed an associates, bachelors, professional, vocational or technical degree, or certificate in specialty areas of study to gain exposure to public service, public policy, as well as agricultural research programs.

The CHFP is a time-limited appointment in the Excepted Service under "Schedule A" hiring authority, as specified in 5 CFR 213.3102(r). Schedule A is a hiring authority Federal agencies can use to hire without going through the lengthy traditional hiring process. Schedule A allows individuals to apply for a Federal appointment through a noncompetitive hiring process. This means that if individuals meet the eligibility status of the appointment and the minimum qualifications for a position, they may be hired for the position without competing with the general public.

The length of time for the initial CHFP appointment is determined based on completion of projects, exposure to diverse program areas, the nature of a developmental assignment, and/or the duration of assignments that meet workforce planning objectives. Initial appointments for Candidates may be for up to a 2-year period. Additional 1-year extensions may be made; however, the appointment cannot

exceed a total of 4-years. Projects will involve working with the Climate Hub partners and stakeholders to develop science-based tools and information products that will help managers of working lands (farms, ranches, forests) better manage in light of the direct and indirect impacts of climate change (e.g., drought, floods, changing growing seasons, increased wild fire and pests, etc.).

An appointment in the CHFP confers no rights to further Federal employment in either the competitive or excepted service upon expiration of the appointment. Fellows interested in remaining with USDA at the end of their fellowships must compete and be selected for competitive service vacancies. Fellows can apply to federal job announcements open to everyone in the general public at any time during their appointment (as long as they are United States Citizens/Nationals; non-citizens may not be selected for positions in the competitive service unless they attain U.S. citizenship.)

PURPOSE AND PROGRAM TIERS:

The USDA Climate Hubs were established by USDA in February 2014 to develop and deliver science-based, region-specific information and technologies, with USDA agencies and partners, to agricultural and natural resource managers that enable climate-informed decision-making, and to provide access to assistance to implement those decisions. Each Climate Fellow will be under the supervision of a Regional Climate Hub Director. The regional Climate Hub offices are located at Agriculture Research Service (ARS) and Forest Service (FS) facilities (see <http://www.usda.gov/climatehubs>) and involve many USDA agencies and programs, including: ARS, FS, National Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), Climate Change Program Office (CCPO), Farm Services Agency (FSA), National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA), Risk Management Agency (RMA), Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS), and Rural Development (RD).

The Climate Hub's ultimate "stakeholders" are land managers: farmers, ranchers, and forest landowners. While the Climate Hubs will work directly with these stakeholders, they rely primarily on established USDA networks and partner technology transfer providers to educate and inform farmers and land managers. Within USDA these resources include USDA Service Centers and Forest Service Threat Centers. Other first-level stakeholders are USDA-supported programs (Cooperative Extension), state climatologists, the Climate Change Response Framework, and the private sector (e.g. certified crop advisers and consultants). An overarching objective of the Climate Hubs is to establish two-way communication between the land management stakeholders and the science/technology providers so that feedback from the land management stakeholders directly influences programs and priorities for the science/technology providers. Ultimately this process results in usable information and tools.

The Climate Hub deliverables are:

- **Partnerships / Coordination:** The success of the Climate Hubs in moving science and tools to land managers can only be achieved through close coordination with USDA agencies and partner research and outreach programs.
- **Assessments:** The Climate Hubs provide periodic regional assessments of risk and vulnerability to production sectors and rural economies, building on material provided under the National Climate Assessment conducted through the USGCRP.

- Information synthesis / Tool development: Information synthesis in the context of the Climate Hubs consists of taking the available science and putting it into a form that can be used by our tech-transfer and land management stakeholders. The first step in this process is a gap analysis to understand the needs of stakeholders and what tools and information services are already available to meet those needs
- Communication and delivery strategy: To delivery appropriate information and training, hubs need to understand their audience/stakeholders and use the most appropriate methods and channels to promote two-way communications and information exchange between the research community and our stakeholders.
- Education: The primary focus is on tech-transfer stakeholders that work directly with both land managers (land management stakeholders) and USDA personnel. Delivery format can be classes, workshops and/or the web.
- Research: The Climate Hubs are a key conduit for: 1) communicating stakeholder needs to research leadership within USDA, 2) identifying research that meets stakeholder needs, and 3) being part of research proposals where the Hub mission can contribute to the success of a proposal.
- Adaptation and mitigation demonstrations: Landowners often need to see a new practice in action to be convinced of its effectiveness. Field demonstrations are therefore a critical “tool”. The Hubs will take advantage of existing demonstrations (e.g., NRCS Conservation Innovation Grants, NEON sites, Experimental Forests, etc.) and work to establish new demonstrations where there are none presently.

Participants in the CHFP are an important part of the Climate Hubs’ activities. As such, they are assigned substantive, meaningful work that supports a wide variety of programs and projects that further the Climate Hub and USDA mission. The duties performed by Fellows will vary across regions, however, the experience provides an invaluable opportunity for the participant to gain work experience in the public sector and supports the Department’s need to develop its workforce talent.

Tier II Professional/Expert Positions: CHFP Tier II level will be used to bring in Candidates at, GS-12 to GS-13 grade levels with expertise/professional experience to fill specialty/program area occupations and assist the Climate Hubs in meeting specialized expertise requirements. Candidates will gain public administration experience, while providing scientific specialty expertise. These GS positions will offer the opportunity for advancement within a “career ladder”, and may be filled at the GS-12 level with full performance level of these positions GS-13 grade.

Tier II Fellows will play an important part of the Climate Hubs mission and will provide vital support to agency programs and projects. USDA Fellows will assist with many aspects of the Climate Hubs’ mission, including but not limited to:

- Work on economic, technical and scientific issues of current and immediate importance to all aspects of USDA;
- Interact with counterparts in USDA science agencies including all mission areas and agencies, and with other government agencies including NOAA, DOI, etc.;
- Travel to professional conferences, meetings, etc.;

- Undertake projects relevant to Climate Hubs objectives;
- Undertaking vulnerability assessments;
- Synthesizing peer-reviewed science for use by outreach professionals;
- Making oral presentations regarding project work.
- Building relationships with academic institutions and other professional or advocacy groups, which may include professional societies and associations.

Tier II Fellows will be placed on a Position Description and an Individual Development Plan (IDP) appropriate to the area of work. The Fellow will be assigned a Mentor. In addition, a CHFP Agreement will be established and signed by the Fellow and the Supervisor. The CHFP Agreement form is included as Appendix A to this document. The CHFP Agreement will be placed in the Fellow's Official Personnel Folder.

Tier I Developmental Positions. CHFP Tier I will be used to hire Fellows into developmental positions hired for specialty or specific program areas. Grade levels for these positions may range from GS-2 through GS-11. The positions these Fellows will be brought into will provide exposure to public policy, experience in the range of USDA's agricultural science programs, or familiarization with public administration. Positions may be filled with career ladders within the tier.

USDA Fellows at the Tier I level will assist with many aspects of the Climate Hubs mission, which may include but not limited to:

- Providing technical support
- Conduct analysis on or provide support to Climate Hub Initiatives
- Writing papers and reports, developing presentations
- Making oral presentations regarding project work
- Assessing program execution, effectiveness, and efficiency
- Building and maintaining relationships with academic institutions and other professional or advocacy groups used as a target recruitment source.

Specific skill requirements or academic disciplines that will enhance present and future organizational performance when recruiting and selecting Tier I Fellows will be targeted.

Tier I Fellows will be placed on a Position Description and an IDP appropriate to the program area and developmental nature of assignments. If the Tier I Fellow will be appointed for a period of more than 6 months, they will be assigned a Mentor. A CHFP Agreement will be established and signed by the Fellow and the Supervisor (see Appendix A). The CHFP Agreement will be placed in the Fellow's Official Personnel Folder.

APPOINTING AUTHORITY: Individuals selected for this program are appointed in the Excepted Service, 5 CFR 213.3102 (r), Schedule A authority. The Schedule A (r) authority is designated for use only for CHFP participants.

TERM OF CHFP APPOINTMENTS

Title 5 CFR 213.3102(r) provides for excepted service time limited appointments up to and not to exceed (NTE) 4 years. Initial appointments will not be automatically made for a 4-year term, but for a determined period that takes into consideration workforce planning objectives, completion of project(s), exposure to diverse program areas, and/or developmental assignments.

It is anticipated that initial appointments for Program Tier II Candidates will be for up to a 2-year period. Additional 1-year extensions may be made; however, the appointment cannot exceed a total of 4-years. The length of time for initial appointments for Program Tier I Candidates will vary depending on the position, but will generally be for a 1-year period. Again, additional 1-year extensions may be made, but, similarly to Tier II Candidates, the appointment also cannot exceed a total of 4-years.

The Fellows appointment confers no rights to further Federal employment in either the competitive or excepted service upon expiration of the appointment, and does not provide non-competitive conversion to another appointment in the Federal Service or conversion to a Career or Career-Conditional Appointment.

Individuals hired under this authority count against the appropriate FTE ceiling for the time they are on the USDA' roles.

APPROPRIATE SPECIALTY/PROGRAM SERIES: Positions filled through this legal authority will be appropriately classified in occupational series. Specific skill requirements or academic disciplines that will enhance present and future organizational performance when recruiting and selecting fellows will be targeted.

For the CHFP Fellows brought in at the Tier II program level, it is anticipated that positions filled through this program will come from most of the science job series, including, but not limited to:

- Agronomy, GS-0471
- Ecology, GS-0408
- Biology, GS-0401
- Forestry, GS-0460
- Civil Engineering, GS-0810
- Agricultural Engineering, GS-0890
- Natural Resources Specialist GS-0301
- Economist, GS-0110
- Chemistry, GS-1320
- Geology, GS-1350
- General Physical Scientist, GS-1301

- Hydrologist, GS-1315
- Meteorologist, GS-1340
- Information Technology Management, GS-2210
- Range Management, GS-0454
- Other science disciplines

For the CHFP Fellows brought in at the Tier I program level, it is anticipated that the entry-level to mid-level positions filled through this program will be in the following examples of job series:

- Chemistry, GS-1320
- Biology, GS-0401
- Physical Science, GS-1300
- Agronomy, GS-0471
- Economist, GS-0110
- Forestry, GS- 0460
- Geology, GS-1350
- Hydrologist, GS-1315
- Natural Resources Specialist, GS-0301
- Management and Program Analysis, GS-0343
- Management and Program Assistance, GS-0344
- General Physical Scientist, GS-1301
- Meteorologist, GS-1340
- Information Technology Management, GS-2210
- Range Management, GS-0454
- Other related disciplines

CANDIDATE ELIGIBILITY/CITIZENSHIP REQUIREMENTS

1. All Fellows must be 18 years of age or older.
 2. Fellows must have completed undergraduate or graduate education as of the time of appointment.
 3. This position is open to U.S. Citizens and permanent residents seeking citizenship. Naturalized U.S. citizens must provide proof of citizenship.
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QUALIFICATIONS

Candidates for the CHFP must meet the qualifications requirements established in 5 CFR 338- Qualification Requirements and OPM qualification standards for the occupational series of the position to be filled. The Candidate can be appointed at a grade lower than the full performance level if qualified.

Candidates targeted for the CHFP will be highly talented diverse individuals who, in addition to completing their formal education prior to appointment in the CHFP, have:

- A commitment to public service;
- Strong written and oral communications skills; and
- Strong analytical thinking/skills; and/or
- Are Professionals with the formal education and credentials in a specialty area; or

POSITIONS AND GRADE LEVELS FOR THE CHFP

Prior to recruiting to fill a position in the CHFP, the Supervisor (i.e., Regional Hub Director) will determine the specialty/program area position to be filled and the purpose of the position, i.e. to provide expertise on projects or meet workforce objectives, or to provide exposure and development in a program area. The Human Resources (HR) Specialist for the Hub hosting agency (ARS or FS), will then work with the Supervisor (Regional Hub Director) will classify the Position Description, if one does not already exist.

Tier II Positions. Tier II assignments will be targeted to candidates with professional degrees and/or expertise. The Supervisor (Regional Hub Director) will work with the HR Specialist to classify the Position Description. Positions in will be established at the GS-12 or GS-13 grade level depending on the program area's needs, rather than the qualifications of the applicant.

Tier I Positions. Tier I developmental positions can be classified using a career ladder progression and will be appropriately established at the GS-2 through GS-11 grade levels, depending on the highest level of duties to be performed.

It is anticipated that USDA will hire Fellows to GS positions that provide for advancement within a "career ladder", meaning that if the Fellow is performing satisfactorily, he/she will advance between GS grades normally on an annual basis until they have reached the top GS grade for that position (which represents full performance).

COMPENSATION:

Salary for a Fellow will typically be set at the first step of the grade level for which they are selected, unless the individual's superior qualifications justify an "above the minimum" appointment. In accordance with 5 CFR 531.212, the determination to set pay above the step 01 must be documented and approved in writing by the ARS/FS HR Director, prior to the Fellow's entrance on duty date.

Additionally, to ensure that these “superior qualifications appointments” are used appropriately and judiciously, USDA will follow the review and approval requirements recently set for these appointments by USDA OHRM, as specified in Departmental Regulation 4050-531-002, “Pay Administration – Superior Qualification and Special Needs Pay Setting Authority”, May 27, 2014. This Regulation includes increased requirements for supporting documentation. (For example, Candidates must sign a statement declining the step one salary and provide pay stubs and/or offer letters that reflect the need for a higher salary to attract the individual.)

PROMOTIONS:

Positions must be classified at the full performance grade level for the duties to be performed prior to filling the position. If the Fellow is hired below the established full performance level of the position, and if all qualification requirements are met, he/she may be promoted (at the manager’s discretion). In order to be promoted, the Fellow must be performing at the fully successful level or better and meet the qualifications requirements for the next higher grade. Eligibility for promotion does not confer an entitlement to promotion.

Promotions will be documented as a conversion to another excepted appointment, citing the same authority used for the original appointment and will maintain the same appointment NTE date (5 CFR 531). Career ladder promotions may be effected within the tier; however they do not cross from Tier I to Tier II.

WITHIN-GRADE INCREASES (WGIs):

Fellows whose appointments have a duration of more than one year may be eligible for WGIs after completing the required waiting period and contingent upon acceptable performance. A Fellow whose appointment is for one year or less is not eligible for a WGI, even if their appointment is subsequently extended so that the total time exceeds one year (5 CFR 531.403).

BENEFITS:

A Fellow appointed for more than one year is eligible for most Federal benefits; however, special provisions may apply under some benefit programs for employees on a part-time or intermittent work schedule. A Fellow with no prior Federal service and appointed for a period of one or more years will automatically be covered under Federal Employees Retirement System (FERS) and enrolled in the Thrift Savings Plan (TSP). These Fellows also have the option of enrolling in the Federal Health Benefits and Life Insurance Programs.

In general, an individual with no prior Federal service and appointed for a period less than one year will be covered by the Federal Insurance Contributions Act (FICA; Social Security) only, and not eligible under FERS or the TSP. In addition, they are not eligible for the Federal Health Benefits or the Federal Employees Government Life Insurance.

For all CHFP appointments over 90 days, appointees will earn annual and sick leave at the appropriate rate based on length of federal service for annual leave (4, 6, or 8 hours) and 4 hours per pay period for sick leave.

TRIAL PERIOD

The first year of a new Fellow's appointment will serve as a trial period. This period is a continuation of the Supervisor's evaluation of an employee's qualifications and suitability for the position for which he/she was appointed.

ADVERSE ACTIONS/REDUCTION IN FORCE (RIF)

If a Fellow is appointed for a period of one or more years, the employee will have the protection afforded in adverse actions procedures of 5 U.S.C. 4303 and 5 U.S.C. 7511 except: (1) while serving the probationary period, and (2) upon expiration of their appointment.

If a Fellow is appointed for a period of one or more years, the employee will be covered by RIF procedures and placed in a "tenure group III". USDA is not required to use RIF procedures to separate Fellows when their appointments expire.

PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT/AWARDS:

USDA Fellows appointed under this authority are covered by the Departmental Regulations, DR-4040-430, Performance Management, if the appointment is expected to exceed 90 days (the minimum performance appraisal period).

Generally, employees hired under this authority are eligible for all awards that can be awarded to competitive service employees, including honorary and monetary awards. Managers must adhere to all applicable USDA and USDA-specific policies, requirements, and delegations of authority when granting awards.

RECRUITMENT

Public notice requirements do not apply for USDA Fellows.

It is anticipated USDA NIFA will contact professional colleagues in academia and professional scientific societies for referrals of possible Fellows Candidates

The USDA CHFP is targeted to highly talented and diverse individuals to include minorities, veterans, and individuals with disabilities. The Climate Hubs, through NIFA, will use its contacts established with historically black, Hispanic, Tribal universities, USDA's OAO, veterans groups, Equal Employment Opportunity Specialists, and other organizations in potential recruitment efforts for the CHFP. Efforts to recruit individuals with disabilities may include contact with USDA's Disability Program Manager and/or USDA's Veterans' employment Program Manager.

The USDA Fellow Experience Program Applicant Guide (November 2012) will be provided to CHFP applicants.

Recruitment incentives. Recruitment incentives are allowed with the intent of attracting top candidates to USDA's CHFP. It is not anticipated at this time that the Climate Hubs will utilize recruitment incentives, but in the event that they are used, recruitment incentives that can be used for Fellows include:

- Payment of travel for interviews
- Recruitment bonuses
- Superior qualifications appointments (see Compensation section above)
- Payment of travel and transportation to first post of duty
- Housing assistance (USDA Scholarship/Internship Programs)

It is anticipated that Fellow positions will be located at the Regional Hub locations.

APPLICATION PROCESS

Applicants to the USDA CHFP are required to provide the following to the Climate Hubs National Lead and the HR Specialist:

1. Cover Letter, which includes a statement as to which region(s) one wishes to be considered for.
2. A copy of transcript(s) from all undergraduate and graduate schools. Official transcripts must be submitted upon receipt of official offer.
3. One letter of recommendation; two letters of recommendation are preferred but not mandated
4. Country/citizenship information (proof of citizenship for Naturalized US citizens is required)
5. Veteran's preference information (if applicable, provide acceptable documentation of preference or appointment eligibility)
6. Curriculum Vitae (detailed summary of educational and academic backgrounds as well as teaching and research experience, publications, presentations, awards, honors, affiliations and other details)
7. Statement of technical and career interests and goals

SELECTION

Fellows will be selected based on their application and demonstrated interest in public service. Candidates' applications should reflect:

- Demonstrated academic excellence
- Interest in government service
- Evidence of skills need to assist USDA
- Personal maturity
- The candidate's potential contribution to the CHFP and to the Climate Hubs mission; and
- Anticipated benefits for the Candidate