

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE  
Agricultural Marketing Service  
Fruit and Vegetable Programs  
Processed Products Branch

**QUESTION & ANSWER SHEET (8/19/05)**

1. When will this downsizing occur?

It could begin as early as October 2005. We anticipate this happening over a period of time.

2. When will I know if I will be affected by this downsizing?

As soon as we know the staffing needs at the various processing plants based on the program chosen (e.g., continuous, plant-assisted continuous, quality assurance program, etc.), we will determine the optimal staffing level. If you are affected, you will be informed as soon as possible.

3. Could I pursue employment at the plant to which I am currently assigned?

Ethics regulations prohibit employees from negotiating for/seeking employment at the plant at which they are assigned to avoid any conflicts of interest. All plants that would like to hire current PPB employees will be asked to provide PPB with a list of employees they desire to enter into negotiations for employment. PPB will act as an intermediary between current PPB employees and the plants.

4. Will there be a buy-out?

No. This requires OPM approval and will not be pursued.

5. Will early-out retirements be offered?

PPB is seeking to obtain voluntary early retirement authority (VERA). VERA allows any employee who is 50 years old and has 20 years of service or any employee with 25 years of service to voluntarily retire. There are annuity reductions for Civil Service Retirement System (CSRS) employees who are less than 55 years old.

6. Where can I find out more information about Government jobs within Florida?

Please check out the following web site on a frequent basis:  
[http://jobsearch.usajobs.opm.gov/agency\\_search.asp](http://jobsearch.usajobs.opm.gov/agency_search.asp).

For other jobs within USDA, including AMS and APHIS, please go to:  
[www.aphis.usda.gov/mrpbs/job\\_opps/find\\_job.html](http://www.aphis.usda.gov/mrpbs/job_opps/find_job.html).

7. Where can I get help in writing a resume?

Noel DiProspero, PPB Training Officer, is available to help you. You may contact her at [Noel.DiProspero@usda.gov](mailto:Noel.DiProspero@usda.gov) or at (202) 720-9897.

8. Where can I obtain more information on the Career Transition Assistance Plan (CTAP)?

A. [www.usda.gov/da/employ/apspd/bul3305.htm](http://www.usda.gov/da/employ/apspd/bul3305.htm) which is USDA Personnel Bulletin No. 330-5, USDA Career Transition Assistance Plan, dated September 24, 1997.

B. <http://www.aphis.usda.gov/library/directives/pdf/MRP4330-1.pdf> which is MRP Directive 4330-1, Career Transition Assistance Plan, dated December 18, 1998;

C. [www.aphis.usda.gov/mrpbs/hr\\_desk\\_guide/4330/index.html](http://www.aphis.usda.gov/mrpbs/hr_desk_guide/4330/index.html) which is MRP Human Resources Desk Guide Subchapter 4330—Career Transition Assistance Plan, dated November 1998.

9. Who is my contact if I would like more information about retirement, TSP, and life and health insurance?

Barbara Johnson is the PPB contact at HRO in Minneapolis. She may be reached at (612) 336-3312 or 1-888-616-7595, or via e-mail at: <mailto:Barbara.j.johnson@aphis.usda.gov>.

10. Who can I contact for questions about non-benefits matters?

Tracy Traxler is the PPB contact at HRO in Minneapolis. She may be reached at (612) 336-3368 or via e-mail at [Tracy.Traxler@aphis.usda.gov](mailto:Tracy.Traxler@aphis.usda.gov).

11. Are there any other benefits that AMS provides to its employees?

Yes. WorkLife4You offers counseling, education and referrals that can help you better manage your personal and work responsibilities. The Employee Assistance Program, which provides an important, comprehensive counseling service, is still available and can be accessed using the same telephone number (1-800-222-0364). WorkLife4You provides more personalized services of a general nature related to family, health and wellness, education, financial/legal and daily life. Internet access is available at: [www.worklife4you.com](http://www.worklife4you.com). To register, please use “USDAAMS” as the Company Code and your first name + your last name + the last 4 digits of your social security number (e.g., JOHNDOE1234) as your Employee ID. If you have any problems getting registered, please contact the WorkLife4You help desk at 888-604-9565.

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE  
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Processed Products Branch

**QUESTION & ANSWER SHEET (11/01/05)**

1. Will there be a reduction-in-force (RIF)?

There will definitely be a downsizing of the workforce in Florida. At this point, we anticipate that a RIF will be occurring. We are attempting to minimize the impact of a RIF by offering early retirements and voluntarily relocations to vacant positions. We hope to achieve an adequate downsizing without having to resort to a RIF, but it appears increasingly unlikely that we will be able to avoid a RIF. Prior to conducting a RIF, we will seek to accomplish this downsizing via early retirements, voluntary relocations and attrition.

2. When would a RIF occur?

There are several steps that must take place prior to a RIF, including: (1) a review of Official Personnel Folders (OPF's) by Human Resources Operations in Minneapolis to determine Service Computation Dates (SCDs) and Veterans Preference; (2) verification of performance appraisal information; (3) finalization of a retention register; and (4) preparation and issuance of a 60-day RIF notice. This means that the earliest a RIF would occur would be sometime in 2006.

3. Could there be more than one RIF?

We anticipate this downsizing happening over a period of time similar to the conversion plants underwent from continuous inspection to plant-assisted continuous (PAC) inspection. This may necessitate multiple RIF's (e.g., the RIF of 30 employees in March 2006, another 20 employees in July 2006 and another 20 employees in October 2006). Please understand that the above numbers and dates are only for the sake of example.

4. How many employees do you anticipate being separated through RIF procedures?

Much depends on the attrition rate as well as whether and, if so, when various plants decide to switch to either Quality Assurance Program (QAP) or Florida Quality Systems Certification (FQSC). QAP only requires one person per plant whereas FQSC is an audit-based program that will require even less employees than that. Thus, it appears that we will be overstaffed by approximately 25-50 full-time employees in January 2006 without any attrition. As you can probably tell by the wide variation in the number of estimated employees who will be excess in January 2006, this is changing and evolving all the time. It is difficult to determine exact numbers at this time since plants can change from one type of service to another.

5. How does the RIF process work?

Please refer to the Employee's Guide to RIF for an explanation of how a RIF is conducted. This publication is available on the internet at <http://www.opm.gov/rif/general/rifguide.asp>.

6. Will all employees in the Processed Fruit and Vegetable Program be affected by the RIF?

No. Appendix B of MRP Directive 4351.1, Reduction-In-Force, defines the competitive area for each program in MRP. The competitive area is the geographical and organizational boundary within which employees compete for retention in a RIF. In the Processed Products Branch, the competitive area for positions in field locations assigned to Regional/Area/Suboffices is Area Office-wide. Employees in positions assigned to the Winter Haven, Florida Area Office are in the same competitive area. This means that only Processed Products Branch employees in the state of Florida will be considered in the work reduction.

7. When will I know if I will be affected by a RIF?

As soon as we know the staffing needs at the various processing plants based on the program chosen (e.g., continuous, plant-assisted continuous, QAP, FQSC, etc.), we will determine the optimal staffing level. If you are affected, you will be informed as soon as possible. HRO in Minneapolis will send RIF notices to the affected employees that explain their options.

8. How will the excepted service employees and competitive service (mixed-tour) employees be impacted by this downsizing?

Positions in the excepted service and competitive service (mixed-tour) positions would be eliminated in any RIF.

9. If I am ultimately RIF separated, will I receive severance pay?

Potentially.

Under the provisions of the Federal Employees Salary Act of 1965, Federal employees serving in full-time and part-time positions under career or career-conditional appointments, or the equivalent in the excepted service, are eligible for severance pay upon separation due to a reduction-in-force or for declining a reassignment outside their commuting area.

The individual must have been currently employed for a continuous period of at least 12 months and must NOT have declined a reasonable offer of employment.

A reasonable offer is a position: (1) in the same agency; (2) in the same commuting area (unless a mobility agreement is in place, in which case the position can be outside the commuting area); (3) within two grade or pay levels below the employee's current grade or pay level; (4) with the same work schedule as the current position; and (5) equivalent in tenure to the current position. Employees receiving injury compensation (excluding compensation for lost wages or payments made on account of someone else's death) or who are eligible to receive a civilian or a uniformed services retirement annuity at the time of separation are not entitled to severance pay.

The number of weeks for which severance pay is to be paid depends upon the length of service. In no case will the severance pay exceed 1 year's pay at the rate received immediately before separation. Determination of the amount of severance pay to which an employee is entitled will be made by Human Resources Operations.

10. Would I be eligible for Career Transition Assistance Plan (CTAP) if I receive a RIF notice?

Yes. If you receive a RIF separation notice, you will be eligible for CTAP.

11. What is CTAP?

The Office of Personnel Management (OPM) provides priority placement assistance and career transition services to displaced federal employees through the Career Transition Assistance Program (CTAP). Employees eligible for the CTAP will receive priority placement consideration from the date of their Reduction-In-Force letter until 1 year after their separation. Employees whose RIF letters are canceled, or who resign or retire before the RIF effective date, are no longer eligible for CTAP priority selection in other agencies.

12. Would I be eligible for unemployment compensation if I am RIF separated?

Since entitlement to unemployment compensation is determined by the State in which an individual resides, you should contact your local State unemployment office regarding your eligibility for unemployment compensation benefits.

13. Will early-out retirements be offered?

PPB was recently notified that OPM approved the request for voluntary early retirement authority (VERA). VERA allows an employee who is 50 years old and has 20 years of service or an employee with 25 years of service to voluntarily retire. There are annuity reductions for Civil Service Retirement System (CSRS) employees who are less than 55 years old. VERA will be offered to all employees organizationally assigned to the Winter Haven Area Office. PPB is working with Human Resources to determine the dates during which applications will be accepted and the date by which employees must retire. That information will be forthcoming soon.

14. When will FQSC be decided upon by the State of Florida's Department of Citrus (DOC)?

The DOC workshop to discuss FQSC has been re-scheduled for November 15, 2005. Another DOC meeting will be held the following day on November 16, 2005.

15. Could I work for the plant at which I am currently assigned?

Ethics regulations prohibit employees from negotiating for or seeking employment at the plant at which they are assigned to avoid any conflicts of interest. All plants that would like to hire current PPB employees will be asked to provide PPB with a list of employees they desire to enter into negotiations for employment. PPB will act as an intermediary between current PPB employees and the plants.

16. Where can I obtain more information on the conducting of a RIF and CTAP?

- A. [www.aphis.usda.gov/library/directives](http://www.aphis.usda.gov/library/directives) which lists MRP Directive 4351.1, Reduction-In-Force, dated December 20, 1999.
- B. <http://www.ocio.usda.gov/directives/files/dr/DR4030-330-01.pdf> which is USDA Directive 4030-330-001, dated August 5, 2005, USDA Special Placement Programs;
- C. [www.aphis.usda.gov/library/directives/pdf/MRP4330-1.pdg](http://www.aphis.usda.gov/library/directives/pdf/MRP4330-1.pdg) which is MRP Directive 4330-1, Career Transition Assistance plan dated December 18, 1998;
- D. [www.aphis.usda.gov/mrpbs/hr\\_desk\\_guide/4330/index.html](http://www.aphis.usda.gov/mrpbs/hr_desk_guide/4330/index.html) which is MRP Human Resources Desk Guide Subchapter 4330—Career Transition Assistance Plan, dated November 1998; and
- E. [http://www.opm.gov/rif/employee\\_guides/career\\_transition.asp](http://www.opm.gov/rif/employee_guides/career_transition.asp) which is the Employee's Guide to Career Transition.

17. Where can I obtain information about retirement, TSP, and life and health insurance?

Please refer to the Benefits Information enclosure, which summarizes the impact of RIF separation on benefits. If you still have questions, Barbara Johnson is the PPB contact at HRO in Minneapolis. She may be reached via e-mail at [barbara.j.johnson@aphis.usda.gov](mailto:barbara.j.johnson@aphis.usda.gov).

To request an annuity estimate, please complete the enclosed Request for Retirement Calculation form and fax it to the HRO-Minneapolis Benefits section at (612) 370-2035.

18. Who can I contact for questions about non-benefits matters?

Please refer to the Separation Information enclosure, which summarizes important information for employees being separated or downgraded through RIF procedures. If you still have questions, Tracy Traxler is the PPB contact at HRO in Minneapolis. She may be reached via e-mail at [tracy.traxler@aphis.usda.gov](mailto:tracy.traxler@aphis.usda.gov).

## QUESTION & ANSWER SHEET (12/01/05)

1. How many processing facilities have switched to the Quality Assurance Program (QAP)?

At this point, only Minute Maid in Auburndale. Silver Springs in Groveland is in the process of switching to QAP. Most of the other plants in the State have expressed an interest in converting to QAP sometime in 2006.

2. What additional duties will Agricultural Commodity Graders (ACG's) be required to perform at a QAP plant?

Many of the duties ACG's are currently performing will be similar to those expected of employees working in a QAP facility. However, you will be expected to institute QAP verification at the facility. ACG's will be trained on those specifics.

3. If only GS-9's can be in charge of a QAP plant, who will relieve assigned GS-9's for annual or sick leave?

It will be similar to how it currently works in which GS-7's fill in on a temporary basis when GS-9's are absent. It is also possible that we will have extra GS-9's who may be called upon to fill in for periods of time.

4. Will GS-7's be trained for QAP?

If he/she is relieving a GS-9 at a QAP facility, the GS-7 will receive just-in-time training. We do plan on conducting a QAP training session soon, but the initial session will, most likely, be limited to GS-9's.

5. Will more GS-9 positions be made available?

At this point, there does not appear to be a need to create more GS-9 positions.

6. If a plant elects QAP and after a year decides to discontinue, can that GS-9 bump someone else in the area?

Possibly. Please keep in mind that the competitive area for a RIF is the entire State; it is not limited to a specific plant or local commuting area.

7. What was decided about the Florida Quality Systems Certification (FQSC) program by the State of Florida's Department of Citrus (DOC)?

The DOC adopted FQSC as a viable program on November 16, 2005. There have been a couple plants that have expressed an interest in FQSC so far. There are many details that still need to be worked out prior to the implementation of FQSC in a citrus facility.

8. When will early retirements be offered under Voluntary Early Retirement Authority (VERA)?

Those who are eligible for voluntary early retirements should have already received letters informing them of their eligibility. The letter states that the deadline by which to make a decision is January 6, 2006, with the effective date of the voluntary early retirement being no later than February 3, 2006.

9. Will VERA be offered throughout the RIF process?

No. There may be another offering after the initial offering (see Question #8), but that has not been determined as of yet.

10. What is the benefit to VERA?

It provides those who are otherwise ineligible to retire voluntarily the opportunity to take a voluntary early retirement. It is a matter of personal choice. A discontinued service retirement, on the other hand, is an involuntary retirement (see Question #11).

11. If I am eligible for VERA, but decline to exercise that option will I be given another opportunity to retire if later I am one of the employees impacted by a RIF?

If you are eligible for VERA, you are also eligible for discontinued service retirement. Should you receive a RIF separation notice, you will be given the opportunity to take a discontinued service retirement. Similar to VERA, discontinued service retirement allows an employee who is 50 years old and has 20 years of service or an employee with 25 years of service to retire, albeit involuntarily.

12. Could the Processed Products Branch (PPB) obtain a waiver of the VERA age and length of service requirements?

The early requirement criteria are established by regulation and cannot be waived. VERA allows an employee who is 50 years old and has 20 years of service or an employee at any age with 25 years of service to voluntarily retire.

13. Can the 2% reduction for every year under 55 be waived for those electing early retirement or discontinued service retirement?

No. This reduction applies to employees in CSRS and CSRS Offset. The reduction cannot be waived for these employees as it is governed and required by Federal law (5 USC 8336(d) and 5 CFR 831.108). FERS employees do not have an age reduction under VERA.

14. Is this reduction to CSRS and CSRS Offset retirement annuities for either a voluntary early retirement or a discontinued service retirement a strict 2% per year?

The annuity rate is reduced by one-sixth of one percent for each full month the retiring employee is under age 55. This equates to a 2% reduction for every year that such an employee is under age 55.

15. Do you have to be involuntarily separated to collect severance pay?

Yes.

16. Will I receive severance pay if I am eligible to retire (either voluntarily or involuntarily)?

No.

17. How can I determine how much severance pay I will receive if I am: (1) eligible to receive it; (2) not offered a continuing position elsewhere within the State; and (3) separated from the rolls?

OPM publication, "The Employee's Guide to Reduction in Force Benefits," discusses benefits for those in a RIF. This publication, which also has a severance pay estimation worksheet, can be found on the following web site: <http://opm.gov/rif/general/egrifben.asp>.

18. Will mixed-tour employees receive severance pay in a RIF?

Government personnel regulations state that any appointment that includes an intermittent work schedule (even if it also includes a part-time and/or a full-time work schedule) is considered to be a non-qualifying appointment for the purpose of severance pay. This means that employees on mixed-tours of duty who are reached for separation in a RIF are not eligible for severance pay.

19. What is the time period between the RIF notice and the separation date?

Regulation requires that an employee be provided a minimum of 60 days advance notice prior to separation.

20. Would I continue to work after receiving a RIF notice?

Yes.

21. Were the performance standards changed with this RIF in mind?

No. In conjunction with the President's Management Agenda, the USDA mandated that all Agencies, including AMS, ensure that all of our performance plans are results-oriented and in alignment with Agency and Departmental strategic plans.

22. Will I receive a Certificate of Expected Separation?

A certificate of expected separation does not apply to this situation since the entire workforce is not subject to a RIF (i.e., not everyone assigned to the Winter Haven Area Office will be RIF'd.).

23. Who is subject to geographic mobility?

AMS Directive 327.1, Geographic Mobility Requirements, dated September 16, 1994, states AMS' policy on geographic mobility as a condition of employment in specified positions. Effective December 13, 1985, all Fruit and Vegetable Programs ACG's were subject to this requirement whether or not individual employees signed a mobility agreement. For further information, please look at AMS Directive 327.1 on the following web site: <http://www.ams.usda.gov/issuances/toc.htm>.

24. Are there any exceptions to geographic mobility other than those mentioned above?

No. If you are subject to geographic mobility, you are contractually obligated to accept another assignment outside of your local commuting area. Failure to accept the reassignment will result in your separation from the Service and you will not be eligible for severance pay or discontinued service retirement.

25. Will employees get to see the retention register?

Yes. Once it is completed, individual employees will be able to see it except that performance ratings will not be shown since performance data is not public information.

26. Will the retention register continue to be updated?

Yes. Personnel regulations require that they are kept updated throughout the RIF process.

27. If plants go to QAP and/or FQSC at different times, how will the RIF be accomplished?

There may be a need for multiple RIF's. This could mean that an employee is offered a continuing position in another part of the State during an initial RIF, but the same employee could be separated from the rolls in an ensuing RIF.

28. How long must a continuing position last if I am offered another position somewhere within the State of Florida?

At least 3 months per 5 CFR 351.701(a).

29. If I receive a RIF notice does that mean I will be automatically separated from the rolls?

No. A RIF notice could list a date of separation. Alternatively, a RIF notice could include the offer of a continuing position in another part of the State.

30. If I receive an offer of a continuing position in another part of the State in a RIF notice, how long will I have to decide whether to take that position?

A minimum of two weeks.

31. When am I eligible for Agency Career Transition Assistance Plan (ACTAP)?

Upon the receipt of a RIF notice. ICTAP eligibility also begins upon receipt of a RIF separation notice.

32. If I moved would my CTAP eligibility transfer with me?

CTAP eligibility is only within the local commuting area of the location at which the RIF occurred. It is based on the duty station from which an employee is separated (e.g., CTAP would not transfer out-of-Florida if an individual moved to another State).

33. How long does ICTAP eligibility last?

ICTAP eligibility concludes 1 (one) year from the date of separation.

34. Can an excepted service temporary employee limited to 1039 hours per service year go on a Temporary Duty Assignment (TDA)?

It's possible, but not likely.

35. Are you converting any excepted service personnel to competitive service (mixed-tour)?

No.

36. If GS-9's need to be RIF'd, could a GS-7 with more time-in-service retain his/her job instead of a GS-9?

It is possible. However, many variables would be involved in this determination, not just time-in-service.

37. Will the employees detailed to citrus canker be recalled from their detail prior to a RIF?

There are currently 4 employees detailed to APHIS through March 30, 2006. Prior to the effective date of a RIF, they will be recalled from their detail.

38. If I don't report on a TDA, will I be charged Absent Without Leave (AWOL)?

Yes.

39. Will there still be a Plant-Assisted Continuous (PAC) program?

Yes, as long as individual plants desire this program.

40. Will those employees who are eligible to retire be required to retire?

No. Employees may choose to retire if they desire to do so, but no one will be forced to retire.

41. Could I volunteer to be RIF'd?

No. A small number of Federal agencies have the statutory authority to allow voluntary RIF separations, but the USDA is not among them.

42. Is there a web site that has information exclusively about the Winter Haven Area Office RIF?

Yes. It is [http://www.ams.usda.gov/fv/ppbweb/RIF/PPB\\_RIF.htm](http://www.ams.usda.gov/fv/ppbweb/RIF/PPB_RIF.htm). This is a read-only web site; it is not interactive. However, it has a lot of useful information, including the updated web sites concerning matters pertaining to a RIF.

43. What web sites have been updated?

The USDA Career Transition Assistance Plan (Personnel Bulletin No. 330-5) has been superseded by USDA Directive 4030-330-001, dated August 5, 2005. The new web site is: <http://www.ocio.usda.gov/directives/files/dr/DR4030-330-001.pdf>. Also, the Dislocated Worker Program web site listed on the "Separation Information" hand-out from the November 1 and 3, 2005, informational meetings has changed. The new web site is: <http://www.careeronestop.org>.

44. Who should I contact for questions about non-benefits matters?

Please contact Lynn McDonald at (612) 336-3358 or [Lynn.E.McDonald@aphis.usda.gov](mailto:Lynn.E.McDonald@aphis.usda.gov). She is a Staffing Specialist and is now the Human Resources contact in Minneapolis instead of Tracy Traxler.

45. How can I submit additional questions?

There are several options including: (1) submitting questions via your Sub-Area Supervisor; (2) contacting the Winter Haven Area Office via phone (863-294-7416) or fax (863-294-4219); (3) accessing an intranet web site titled, <http://agnis/sites/FV/PPB/FRIF/default.aspx> (this site is an interactive web site although it can only be accessed on an AMS computer); or (4) contacting Ms. McDonald or Benefits Specialist Barbara Johnson in Minneapolis.

## QUESTION & ANSWER SHEET (3/28/06)

1. How will the excepted service employees and competitive service (mixed-tour) employees be impacted by this downsizing?

As it becomes necessary to eliminate excepted service and competitive service (mixed-tour) positions, this will be accomplished via RIF separation actions and/or through the non-renewal of time limited appointments in the case of excepted service positions.

2. When will the first round of reduction-in-force (RIF) actions occur?

The first round of RIF-separation notices will be issued the first part of April. Human Resources Operations in Minneapolis will be mailing those letters to the affected employees.

3. How many employees do you anticipate being separated through RIF procedures in this first round?

Three GS-5 competitive service (mixed-tour) employees and four GS-7 competitive service (full-time) employees.

4. When will the second round of RIF actions occur?

It depends on what individual plants decide to do and the attrition rate of individual employees.

5. Do you anticipate the need for additional downsizing?

Yes. We are continuing to downsize the workforce in Florida as employees accept reassignments with PPB in other parts of the U.S., are selected for other positions within the Branch and/or outside the Branch or retire by electing to participate in VERA or optional retirement.

6. Would the Processed Products Branch pay relocation expenses for an employee who accepted an offer of a continuing position in another part of Florida?

Yes. Applicable relocation expenses will be paid in accordance with the Federal Travel Regulations.

7. When will there be a career transition workshop?

We have scheduled a two-day workshop for May 31-June 1, 2006, on "Resume Writing and Job Search Strategies." This workshop will be conducted by the AMS Training Institute. Additional information will be provided to you at a later date.

## QUESTION & ANSWER SHEET (7/06/06)

1. How many employees do you anticipate being separated in the first round of reduction-in-force (RIF) actions?

One additional competitive service (full-time) employee was added to the first round of RIF-separation actions. This action will be effected in the next few days. This will raise the total number of competitive service (full-time) employees who are RIF-separated to five GS-7 employees.

2. Are the employees separated in the first round of RIF actions eligible for severance pay?

Yes, except for those eligible to retire and those with mixed-tours of duty.

3. When will the second round of reduction-in-force (RIF) actions occur?

It depends on what individual plants decide to do and the attrition rate of individual employees.

4. Do you anticipate the need for additional downsizing?

Yes. We are continuing to downsize the workforce in Florida.

5. Can you foresee a situation in which you would RIF-separate a GS-9 employee?

Not at this time. However, if it is determined that we have an excess number of GS-9 ACG's, a GS-9 may bump or retreat (if the criteria for either action are met) to a GS-7 ACG position displacing the employee who occupies that job. The employee who moves into the GS-7 position would be placed on the competitive service (full-time) GS-7 retention register.

6. Could a competitive service (full-time) employee convert to a mixed-tour position?

Yes, but there must be a mixed-tour position available.

7. When will the updated retention registers be issued?

Soon after Human Resources Operations in Minneapolis finalizes the revisions.

8. What part does the State of Florida play in the Florida Quality Systems Certification (FQSC) program?

FQSC is a State audit-based program. USDA serves as auditors in the program.

9. Are any citrus facilities under FQSC?

Yes, there is one facility.

10. Who would be responsible for contaminated juice under FQSC?

That would be the plant's responsibility.

11. What happens if there are too many call-backs under FQSC?

As stated earlier in Question #8, this is a State of Florida program. The Florida Department of Citrus will determine the appropriate action.

12. If an employee is the bottom person on the retention register, but the plant at which he/she is assigned is remaining under continuous inspection, could that employee be RIF-separated?

Yes. The retention register determines who receives a RIF notice.

13. What are the requirements to be eligible to retire?

Generally, the retirement eligibility requirements are 30 years of service provided the employee is at least 55 years of age, 20 years of service if 60 years old and 5 years of service if age 62. Please consult with Benefits Specialist Barbara Johnson regarding your specific and individual situation. She can be reached at (612) 336-3312. Her e-mail address is [barbara.j.johnson@aphis.usda.gov](mailto:barbara.j.johnson@aphis.usda.gov).

14. How can a GS-7 ACG who has more seniority than a GS-9 ACG be RIF-separated instead of the GS-9?

Grade levels constitute different competitive levels during a RIF. Work schedules also determine different competitive levels (full-time, mixed-tour, etc.).

Management determines which jobs will be abolished and must specify the grade level, series and work schedule as well as the number of each type to be eliminated. Employees are grouped into competitive levels based on series, grade and work schedule, and initially compete for retention within the competitive level. If the criteria for bump or retreat are met, an employee who is released from his/her competitive level may then displace an employee in a continuing position in a different competitive level that is at the same grade level or no more than three grade or pay levels below the grade the released employee holds. However, the RIF regulations do not allow an employee to displace an employee in a higher graded position.

15. When applying for jobs during a RIF, what assistance would an employee receive?

Agency Career Transition Assistance Plan (ACTAP) begins upon the receipt of a RIF notice. Interagency Career Transition Assistance Plan (ICTAP) eligibility begins upon receipt of a RIF-separation notice.

16. If you receive severance pay, can you receive unemployment compensation concurrently with severance pay and/or after you receive the last severance pay installment?

Once you receive a RIF-separation notice, you are encouraged to pursue this question with the State Unemployment office.

17. Will early-out retirements be offered again?

PPB was recently notified that the Office of Personnel Management approved an extension request for voluntary early retirement authority (VERA). VERA allows any employee who is 50 years old and has 20 years of service or any employee with 25 years of service to voluntarily retire. There are annuity reductions for Civil Service Retirement System (CSRS) employees who are less than 55 years old. PPB is working with Human Resources to determine the dates during which applications will be accepted and the date by which employees must retire. That information will be forthcoming soon.

## QUESTION & ANSWER SHEET (10/05/06)

1. When will the second round of reduction-in-force (RIF) actions for competitive service (full-time) employees occur?

In an effort to further mitigate the impact of another RIF, we will be directing the reassignment of employees in locations where we are overstaffed to other areas of the State where we need full-time employees. We hope to utilize directed reassignments through the end of 2006.

2. How many employees will be issued directed reassignments?

Initially, this will impact two GS-7 competitive service (full-time) employees. As plants shift to QAP or other elective services, we will determine if additional directed reassignments are necessary.

3. Will employees who decline a directed reassignment, but meet the minimum eligibility requirements for a discontinued service retirement (i.e., an involuntary retirement) be able to retire?

No. Employees who decline a directed reassignment are not eligible to retire on a discontinued service retirement (DSR) except for a few employees hired by the Processed Products Branch prior to December 13, 1985, which is the date when Agricultural Commodity Graders became subject to geographic mobility according to AMS Directive 327.1, Geographic Mobility Requirements. In other words, most employees who decline a directed reassignment WILL NOT be eligible to retire even if they are 50 years old and have 20 years of service or if they have 25 years of service regardless of their age (these are the eligibility requirements for a DSR). Employees can retire if they meet eligibility requirements for a voluntary/immediate retirement (see Question #5 below for Civil Service Retirement System employees and Question #6 below for Federal Employees Retirement System employees).

4. Will employees who decline a directed reassignment be eligible to receive severance pay?

Any employee covered by AMS Directive 327.1 WILL NOT be eligible to receive severance pay. This Directive applies to Agricultural Commodity Graders.

5. What are the voluntary retirement eligibility requirements for an employee under the Civil Service Retirement System (CSRS)?

The retirement eligibility requirements are 30 years of service provided the employee is at least 55 years of age, 20 years of service if 60 years old and 5 years of service if age 62. Please consult with Benefits Specialist Barbara Johnson regarding your specific and individual situation. She can be reached at (612) 336-3312. Her e-mail address is [barbara.j.johnson@aphis.usda.gov](mailto:barbara.j.johnson@aphis.usda.gov).

6. What are the voluntary retirement eligibility requirements for an employee under the Federal Employees Retirement System (FERS)?

Generally, the retirement eligibility requirements are 30 years of service provided the employee has met his/her minimum retirement age (MRA), 20 years of service if 60 years old and 5 years of service if age 62. The MRA depends on the year you were born (e.g., if you were born in 1951, your MRA is 55 years and 8 months). Once a FERS employee reaches his/her MRA, he/she can retire with at least 10 years of service although reduced benefits may apply. Reduced benefits means if you retire at the MRA with at least 10 years but less than 30 years of service, your benefit will be reduced at the rate of 5% for each year you are under age 62. However, you can avoid part or all of the reduction by postponing the commencing date of your annuity. Please consult with Benefits Specialist Barbara Johnson regarding your specific and individual situation. She can be reached at (612) 336-3312. Her e-mail address is [barbara.j.johnson@aphis.usda.gov](mailto:barbara.j.johnson@aphis.usda.gov).

7. Will my retirement annuity be taken directly from my Thrift Savings Plan (TSP) account?

No. Employees covered by a retirement plan are required to contribute to the Civil Service Retirement and Disability Fund. The Federal Government also contributes to this fund which is a defined benefit plan. Your retirement annuity is drawn from these funds which are separate from TSP, which is similar to a 401(k).

8. When am I required to withdraw my TSP account?

There is a mandatory “draw down” in the year after a retired/separated individual turns 70½. In such a scenario, the TSP will send the participant a letter explaining that he/she must start a mandatory withdrawal which is determined by how much is in the account.

9. If it is determined that another RIF needs to be conducted, would an employee on a temporary duty assignment (TDA) be exempt from a RIF-separation action?

No. If the employee on the TDA is the employee determined by position on the retention register to be separated via a RIF, that employee would return from the TDA prior to the effective date of his/her RIF-separation action.