UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
Agricultural Marketing Service
Fruit and Vegetable Programs
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; (3) 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 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 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 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 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.

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.