



# USDA Forest Service Fire and Aviation Management Frequently Asked Questions



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## Fire & Aviation Management Occupational Series Changes

Comment or questions should be addressed to [gs301project@fs.fed.us](mailto:gs301project@fs.fed.us)

We look forward to hearing from you.

### **Q: Why do we need to change to the GS-0301 Occupational Series?**

**A:** The decision to use the GS-0301 series for FAM managerial positions came about as the result of concerns expressed in the 2008 USDA-OIG audit and regulatory actions that the Forest Service was required to implement to be in compliance with OPM direction follow the 2010 audit.

To be in compliance with OPM direction, the Forest Service had to:

- Discontinue the use of the GS-0462 series for positions at the GS-12 and higher grade levels, and limit use at the GS-11 level.
- We could no longer qualify experience that was gained in the GS-0462 series towards meeting the specialized experience requirements for the GS-0401 series.
- We could no longer have a direct career path between the GS-0462 and the GS-0401 series as this practice was not supported by applicable qualification standards. As clarified by OPM, these two occupational series need to have distinctly different career paths, and GS-0462 employees should primarily enter the GS-0401 series at the entry grade level (i.e. GS-05).

OIG and OPM also directed the Forest Service to re-examine our use of the GS-0401 series, and separately OIG and OPM both suggested that the FS consider using the GS-0301 series.

As we could no longer progressively qualify applicants from the GS-0462 series for GS-0401 positions, and could no longer use the GS-0462 series for GS-12 and higher grade levels, the Forest Service needed to re-examine the occupational series to ensure that critical vacancies could be filled with qualified and experienced individuals, and to ensure that workforce succession goals could be maintained.

### **Q: Is this a good thing?**

**A:** It is a necessary thing, and the direction from OPM cannot be ignored. Implementing the GS-0301 series for managerial positions will allow lower graded technicians to progress into higher graded managerial positions and utilize their extensive experience in fire operations, leadership, safety, risk management, and knowledge of fire and aviation to manage FAM programs at all levels. Furthermore, the FS' ability to qualify employees for the GS-0401 series was in

jeopardy and would have created a glass ceiling for GS-0462 employees at the GS-9 grade level even if they possessed or acquired positive education.

FAM leadership believes that the inclusion of the GS-0301 series will build and maintain an effective field of experienced practitioners, and will result in fire managers that are experienced, qualified, and can make sound decisions.

**Q: What is the FAM Occupational Series Template?**

A: The Fire and Aviation Management (FAM) Occupational Series Template is a model that illustrates the three main occupational series that FAM positions will be categorized in based on applicable qualification standards that best fit the duties of each position.

- GS-0462: GS-2 thru GS-9 fire positions using existing NSPDs
- GS-0301: GS-9/11 thru GS-15 managerial positions. The first seven of these positions have already been developed and approved for secondary firefighter retirement coverage, and we hope to complete the remainder in 2012.
- GS-0401: GS-7/9 thru GS-15 specialist positions that have duties requiring specific scientific knowledge such as Fuels Specialists, Fuels Planners, Fire Ecologists, etc. Chief Tidwell's July 8, 2011 memo re-instated the use of the GS-0401 series for four fuels management positions at the GS-9 and GS-11 level.

The Template is in response to workforce succession concerns expressed by USDA-OIG in their 2008 audit over the Forest Service's use of the GS-0401 series, and is also in response to the regulatory guidance that OPM informed us of during their 2010 audit which resulted in changes in how applicants can qualify for a GS-0401 position and limitations with the GS-0462 series.

Not shown on the Template are positions in the GS-1712 Training Specialists and GS-2100 Aviation series which are also in use by FAM. These occupational series will continue to be used, and in some cases positions that were previously classified in the GS-0462 series at the GS-11 or GS-12 grade level will be evaluated for re-classification in the GS-1712 or GS-2101 to resolve the issue of using the GS-0462 series at these grade levels.

Additional versions of the Occupational Series Template will be released when updated.

**Q: What does the GS-0301 series do for Forest Service employees?**

A: The GS-0301 is an "administrative/managerial" series that more appropriately describes the duties of positions that have a preponderance of duties in managing programs. Use of the GS-0301 series will allow the Forest Service to fill key FAM positions that we have been unable to fill using the GS-0462 or GS-0401 series following the OPM audit.

- The GS-0301 is similar to the GS-0401 series in that it is a two-grade interval series up thru GS-11, after that it is one-grade interval.
- Firefighter retirement coverage for the GS-0301 series positions is possible, and USDA recently approved the first group of GS-0301 NSPDs that were submitted for coverage.
- The GS-0301 series will have a career path in FAM from GS-9/11 thru GS-15.

- The GS-0301 series allows for a progressive career path from other series (specifically the GS-0462 series), provided that the applicant can show 12 months of specialized experience in managing fire programs or a component of a program at the next lower grade level.
- There can be mobility between the GS-0301 to the GS-1712 and/or GS-2101 series and vice versa, provided the applicant can meet the specialized experience for each series.
- GS-0401 employees can qualify for GS-0301 positions, provided they can demonstrate a minimum of 12 months of specialized experience in program management and coordination.
- For FAM positions covered under IFPM and FS-FPM Standards, the Primary and secondary NWCG core requirements and additional required training are still applicable conditions of hire and employment.
- GS-0301 series positions can administratively supervise employees in other series, including the GS-0401.
- NFFE-FSC was involved with the development of the Occupational Series Template, and supports management's plans to use the GS-0301 series for FAM positions.
- OPM and USDA approved the concept of the Forest Service's Occupational Series Template in 2011.
- GS-0301 series NSPDs will include a broad range of fire managerial duties such as preparedness, suppression, risk management, aviation, training, prevention/mitigation, interagency coordination, mobilization, budget planning, prescribe fire and/or mechanical fuels implementation, etc.
- The source of knowledge for these duties can come from on-the-job training, past experiences, agency-sponsored NWCG training.
- However, certain duties that require the incumbent to possess scientific knowledge that can only be obtained from positive education leading to a bachelor's degree must be assigned to positions in the GS-0401 or GS-0460 series. Some examples of these duties are: analysis of existing vegetation condition and quantifying departure from HRV; assessing and quantifying cumulative effects of a management activity on natural and cultural resources; designing monitoring surveys or sampling schemes to collect data; evaluating data to assess or quantify changing condition, etc.

**Q. Where are we at with re-classifying positions into the GS-0301 series?**

A: In October 2011, USDA approved the following GS-0301 positions for secondary firefighter retirement coverage:

- GS-0301-12/13 Forest FMO-High Complexity
- GS-0301-11/12 Forest FMO-High Complexity
- GS-0301-11/12 Forest FMO-Moderate Complexity
- GS-0301-11/12 Forest AFMO-High Complexity
- GS-0301-12/13 GACC Center Manager

- GS-0301-11/12 GACC Deputy Center Manager
- GS-0301-11/12 Smokejumper Base Manager

In the fall of 2011 FAM subject matter experts and HRM Classification Specialists developed GS-0301 NSPDs for the following positions and submitted them to USDA for firefighter retirement coverage determination:

- GS-09/11 Forest FMO-Moderate Complexity
- GS-09/11 Forest AFMO-High Complexity
- GS-09/11 Forest AFMO-Moderate Complexity
- GS-09/11 District/Zone FMO-High Complexity
- GS-09/11 District/Zone FMO-Moderate Complexity
- GS-09/11 GACC Dispatch Coordinator
- GS-09/11 Initial Attack Dispatch Center Manager

In 2012, FAM and HRM will be evaluating additional positions for classification into the GS-0301 series:

- GS-09/11 Fire Planner
- GS-09/11 Fire Prevention / Mitigation
- GS-09/11 Smokejumper Assistant Base Manager
- GS-09/11 Smokejumper Manager (Loft, Operations, Training, Load Master)

Until the GS-0301-09/11 NSPDs are approved for use, the existing NSPD may be used to fill vacancies in these positions.

Positions at the GS-9 target grade level were evaluated in 2011 for re-classification into the GS-0301 series, but were determined to be appropriately classified in the GS-0462 series as the 0400 Technician Classification Standard fully supports use of the GS-0462 series for this grade level and range of duties.

**Q: When will the newly approved GS-0301 positions be available for use?**

A: As of January 4, 2012, the NSPDs and OCRs for GS-0301-12/13 Forest FMO, GS-0301-11/12 Forest FMO, and GS-0301-11/12 Forest AFMO are available in AVUE for use in filling vacancies. The GS-0301-12/13 GACC Center Manager and GS-0301-11/12 GACC Deputy Center Manager NSPDs are also available, but will not have an OCR due to the relatively low number of positions. The GS-0301-11/12 Smokejumper Base Manager NSPD is pending USDA concurrence to apply the Smokejumper medical qualification standards.

The GS-0301-11 NSPDs that were developed in 2011 are pending firefighter retirement coverage determination by USDA, and should be available for use in 2012 when approved by the Department.

**Q: What options exist for fire management technicians that were hired under former Chief Kimbel's "interim direction"?**

When the GS-0301 NSPDs for each grade level are completed, employees that were hired using a GS-0462 PD prior to or during the interim period under Chief Kimbel's May 29, 2009 memo will be non-competitively reassigned into the new GS-0301 NSPD. In addition, employees that are currently in a GS-0462 position description should be eligible to apply for

GS-0301 positions provided they possess at least 12 months of specialized experience in program management, coordination, and oversight of a fire program.

- As described in the January X, 2012 memo, current incumbents of the GS-11/12 and GS-12/13 positions that were recently approved for firefighter retirement will be non-competitively reassigned into the GS-0301 NSPD for their position.
- When the remaining FAM managerial positions at the GS-9/11 grade level are reclassified into the GS-0301 series, incumbents in those positions will also be non-competitively reassigned.
- Additional guidance for reassignment into the GS-0301 series will be released when the NSPDs are completed and approved by USDA.

**Q: What effect will reassignment to the GS-0301 series have on higher graded GS-0462 Forestry Technicians?**

A: As mentioned above, the Forest Service has discontinued use of the GS-0462 series for GS-12 positions and when the remaining GS-11 positions have been reclassified in the GS-0301 series the GS-0462-11 NSPDs will also be discontinued (except in rare instances when the grade is based on supervisory duties).

Currently HRM is evaluating all FAM GS-0462-11 position descriptions for re-classification into the GS-0301 series. HRM has committed to completing this evaluation/reclassification effort by the end of CY2012 and will be available for use once they are approved by USDA for firefighter retirement coverage. Incumbents that are occupying their positions as a GS-0462 when the GS-0301 NSPDs become available will be non-competitively re-assigned into the GS-0301 position description. HRM will be developing a reassignment process and will communicate these steps to the field when it is ready for implementation.

**Q: What effect will the conversion to the GS-0301 series have on lower graded GS-0462 Forestry Technicians?**

A: There should be no impact to lower graded Forestry Technicians. As displayed in the Occupational Series Template, firefighting positions ranging from GS-02 thru GS-9 will remain in the GS-0462 series. The 400 Technician Classification Standard fully supports the use of the GS-0462 series up to the GS-09 grade level.

**Q: How will specialized experience requirements for the GS-0301 series affect lower graded Forestry Technician employees?**

A: Lower graded Forestry Technician employees (GS-2 thru GS-9) will have the ability to progress into higher graded GS-0301 positions provided they can meet the one year of specialized experience requirement for the GS-0301 series.

**Q: What additional things can FAM employees do to enhance their career advancement under the Occupational Series Template model?**

A: Program management experience can be gained through performance of some forestry technician duties (i.e. managing a district suppression, fuels, or prevention program, managing

an IHC or Helitack program, etc), or through specific work assignments that provide the applicant with experience in coordination, oversight, and managing programs or program components.

However, it should be noted that it may require multiple years as a lower grade Forestry Technician to accumulate the required 12 months of specialized experience to qualify for a GS-0301 position. It will be critical to carefully document the experience in the application process with the appropriate percentages of time spent managing or administering a program.

**Q: If I am re-assigned to a GS-0301 position, will I still be a professional?**

A: The term “professional” has a couple of definitions that are distinctly different but are often used interchangeably.

- OPM defines “professional-scientific work” as: *work that requires sharing an organized body of knowledge that is uniquely acquired through extensive education or training at a recognized college or university equivalent to the curriculum requirements for a bachelor’s or higher degree with major study in or pertinent to the specialized field.* As it relates to the GS-0401 series, positive education must be in biology, natural resources, chemistry, or agricultural sciences.
- “Professional” can also be defined as: *engaging in a specific occupation for pay as a means of livelihood, or being such in the manner of one practicing a profession.* Such as being a full-time fire manager or firefighter, as opposed to having fire as a collateral duty.

Applying OPM’s definition of professional work for the purposes of classification, we have concluded that only those positions with duties that clearly require the employee to possess scientific positive education leading to a four year degree in order to accomplish their work are to be classified in the GS-0401 Natural Resources Management and Biological series.

In contrast, many of FAM positions rely heavily on knowledge, skills, and abilities such as leadership, organization, coordination, and managing fire programs; providing oversight to safety and applying risk management; ability to coordinate complex issues or fire operations; knowledge and abilities to manage wildland incidents; and working knowledge of fire behavior, weather, and fire effects; and ability to plan and implement prescribed burns or carry out operational assignments of a highly technical nature. The knowledge to support these duties can be learned through extensive practical experience working in emergency management and land management, vocational on-the-job training, and agency-sponsored NWCG courses.

USDA-OIG and OPM at different times recommended that the Forest Service review all of our FAM positions for appropriate classification, and after careful review of the applicable Classification and Qualification Standards for the GS-0401 series the Forest Service has determined that the GS-0301 series is a better fit for the majority of FAM’s managerial positions.

Regardless of series, every Forest Service employee is expected to carry out their duties in a professional manner befitting of the agency’s role in managing wildland fire, and uphold our reputation as one of the world’s leading fire management organizations.

**Q: Now that we're using the GS-0301 series, is there any reason to attend educational career-development programs such as TFM or CEEM?**

A: Any opportunities for education or training, especially programs developed specifically for fire management, are valuable opportunities to increase one's knowledge and can further your career. Programs such as Technical Fire Management (TFM) and Continuing Education Ecosystem Management (CEEM) will continue to be supported by the Forest Service.

In the two decades prior to OPM's 2002 approval of the GS-0401 Natural Resources Management and Biological Sciences series the Forest Service was actively enrolling employees in TFM and CEEMs sessions. A common motivation for attending TFM or CEEMs in the 1980's and 1990's was career development by broadening an employee's knowledge, and it was not merely thought of as a way to attain positive education credits.

Although not specifically required as a qualification standard in the GS-0301 series, completion of programs such as TFM or CEEMs can still be extremely beneficial to one's career, and may be used as a quality ranking factor by the selecting official when comparing applicants of similar background and experience.

**Q: Do I have to do anything different in my application when applying for a GS-0301 position?**

A: The qualification standards for the GS-0301 series requires at least 12 months of specialized experience that equips the applicant with the particular knowledge, skills, and abilities to perform successfully the duties of the position, and that is typically in or related to the work of the position to be filled. To be creditable, specialized experience must have been equivalent to at least the next lower grade level in the normal line of progression for the occupation in the organization.

When applying to a GS-0301 position, the applicant's work experience narratives or response to Knowledge Skills and Abilities (KSA's) should reflect the type of work and percentage of time that the employee performed those duties to meet the minimum of 12 months specialized experience requirements.

Typical experience that would be considered qualifying for the GS-0301 series are those where the applicant can demonstrate that they have managed a fire program or component of a program, provided oversight to the implementation or execution of that program's mission, coordinated with internal and external partners to accomplish a task or program goal, resolved issues by analyzing the problems to arrive at a solution, and applied judgment that is typically demonstrated by substantial past experience in fire and aviation management.

Not all of the duties performed as a technician can be considered qualifying as specialized experience for the GS-0301 series. Lower graded GS-0462 employees should expect to require more than one year of service to accumulate the required 12 months of specialized experience whereas higher grade GS-0462 employees may be able to claim a higher percentage of their day-to-day duties as qualifying specialized experience.

*For example: Over the course of a GS-0462-7/8 Engine Captain's normal duties, the majority of the employee's time is probably realistically only performing "technician" duties. However, some percentage of those duties may qualify as specialized experience for the GS-0301 series for the periods when they were planning for management of the district's engine program, or coordinating and providing oversight for a component of the district's overall fire and aviation program. Using this example, if 4 months per year the Engine Captain is performing duties that would qualify as specialized experience for the GS-0301 series, then it would take that Engine Captain 3 years (4 mos X 3 = 12 mos) to accumulate the 12 months of specialized experience that is required to qualify for a GS-0301 series position at the next higher grade level.*

*In contrast, a higher percentage of a GS-0462-09 IHC Superintendent or District AFMO normal duties would be considered managerial, coordinating, or providing oversight to their program, and would be able to claim a higher percentage of the work they do each year is qualifying for the GS-0301 specialized experience requirement. In this instance, they most likely would accumulate the 12 months of specialized experience in less than two years.*

Applicants must ensure that they adequately describe the work that they are performing and provide approximations of time spent performing those duties in order for it to be counted towards the 12 month requirement for specialized experience.

Work that would be considered qualifying for the GS-0301 series may include a broad range of activities that meet the intent of managing a fire program, coordination, and oversight such as but not limited to:

- Managing the district's preparedness program (staffing, training, IQCS and Redcard records, equipment readiness, annual updates to plans, etc.)
- Managing a safety program, developing or updating Job Hazard Analyses (JHA), conducting reviews and follow-up actions following accidents or injuries, etc.
- Administering and/or tracking the annual budget, managing expenditures, developing program of work based on budget, providing oversight of purchases, etc.
- Overseeing mission execution, monitoring progress, and ensuring targets are being met.
- Experience in developing and managing the pre-season critical training, or serving as course coordinator or lead instructor for training courses.
- Coordinate with the District/Forest in pre-season preparedness planning and integration with the unit's annual program of work.
- Being responsible for managing facilities maintenance at out-stations or lookouts.
- Managing fire equipment. Including being responsible for managing the fire cache, inventories, stocking levels, ordering replenishment, and accountable for property.
- Serving as the unit fleet manager, such as managing monthly mileage/use record processing, ensuring maintenance is performed as scheduled, ordering replacement, assessing annual needs or managing surplus vehicles, winterizing, pool vehicles, etc.
- Coordinating or participating in Regional or National committees, annual pre-season coordination meetings with partnering agencies, post-season programmatic AARs, participation on national committees as a SME for input, developing / reviewing or revising national standards (engine, IHC, smokejumper, helitack, rappel, etc).

- Functioning as a unit Duty Officer to manage initial attack activities, coordinating with partner agencies or cooperators, and/or participation in local MAC groups during periods of resource shortages.
- Coordinating the accomplishment or scheduling of prescribed fire or mechanical fuels targets.
- Managing a district's chainsaw program, coordinating training and certification, and providing oversight to training and certification records.
- Managing Redcard records for personnel on their unit, overseeing the entry of IQCS annual updates, managing position taskbook initiation/certification, and/or providing oversight to ensure that PMS 310-1 and FSH 5109.17 standards are being met.
- Providing oversight to subordinates that do procurement, time, travel, SHIPS, etc.
- Administrative supervision that is included in a supervisory position.