



USDA Forest Service Fire and Aviation Management Questions & Answers



Topic: Wildland Firefighter Occupational Series Template for FAM Positions

WHAT DOES THE OCCUPATIONAL SERIES TEMPLATE ACCOMPLISH?

Since early 2011 a collaborative effort between FAM, HRM, and NFFE leadership and subject matter experts has been underway to resolve a number of concerns and regulatory issues that have arisen since the 2008 OIG and 2009 OPM audits regarding the Forest Service's past practices of using the GS-0462 and GS-0401 series. The Occupational Series Template was developed to display the three main occupational series that will be used to classify the majority of FAM positions as part of a near-term strategy that will be employed until a unique wildland firefighter series can be established.

Up until now, the FS has been operating under interim guidance issued by former Chief Kimbell on May 29, 2009 that temporarily suspended the use of the GS-0401 series for certain grade levels. As described in Chief Tidwell's July 8, 2011 memo, the GS-0401 series is re-instated for four Fuels Specialist positions in IFPM and FS-FPM; the GS-0462 series will continued to be used for GS-02 through GS-09 firefighting positions; and the Forest Service is currently working with USDA and OPM to evaluate and approve the use of the GS-0301 Administrative/Managerial series for GS-09 through GS-15 managerial positions in FAM.

Approximately 40-50 National Standard Position Descriptions (NSPDs) will need to be reclassified in the GS-0301 series and this effort will be on-going throughout the remainder of FY2011 and FY2012. A high priority was placed on reclassifying seven critical positions at the GS-12/13 grade levels, and those NSPDs should be available for use as soon as USDA has determined that these positions qualify for firefighter retirement coverage.

WHO IS LEADING THE EFFORT FOR CHANGE?

In March 2011 the FS convened a Summit with FAM, HRM, and NFFE-FSC leadership. The task was to develop collaborative and comprehensive solutions to resolve issues affecting the agency's current organizational structure, and to develop long-term strategies to ensure future workforce succession. Subject matter experts have been working diligently in a united campaign to find logical solutions that can be implemented in a reasonable amount of time.

As a result of this effort, the Occupational Series Template was developed that will help to ensure compliance with OPM regulations. This template also serves as a guide to assist FAM with its efforts to maintain and ensure a sustainable organization.

WHO ARE THE KEY PLAYERS IN THIS CHANGE EFFORT?

FAM, HRM, and NFFE-FSC leadership and key program area specialists were tasked to take a global approach to resolving the problems currently facing the agency's organizational structure and the ramifications for workforce succession into the future.

Consensus has since been reached among the Regional Fire Directors, Regional Foresters, Executive Leadership Team, and the Chief. Final approval from USDA and OPM is expected to occur shortly.

WHAT CAUSED THIS NEED FOR CHANGE?

Over the course of the last year, the FS became aware of a number of constraints and OPM regulations associated with the GS-0462 Forestry Technician and the GS-0401 Fire Management Specialist series. These constraints and regulations required modifications to the organizational structure currently employed by FAM to ensure that workforce succession goals can be achieved. The primary need for change came from the OIG audit in 2008 and the OPM audit in 2009.

The 2008 OIG audit raised concerns with the continued use of the GS-0401 series and whether or not the agency could sustain a viable workforce. The 2009 OPM audit brought about awareness of OPM regulations regarding the use of the GS-0401 Supplemental Qualification Standards for Fire Management Specialists, and how these regulations adversely affected the agency's future abilities to fill key FAM positions. The consequences of these two audits resulted in the FS taking a holistic approach to re-examining the occupational series for FAM's workforce, and the Occupational Series Template is intended to resolve issues that were raised by the two audits.

WHAT WILL THE GS-0301 SERIES ACCOMPLISH?

The GS-0301 Administrative/Managerial occupational series will provide upward career mobility for employees who exhibit leadership and managerial skills in managing fire programs and emergency management.

The GS-0301 series places an emphasis on an employee's ability to manage fire programs and coordinate fire operations, more so than the GS-0401 series. Although positive education is not a core requirement for the GS-0301 series, education and NWCG training are still valuable investments for employee development. Furthermore, a combination of related education and specialized experience can be used to qualify for the GS-0301 series; however positive education for the GS-301 series is not limited to biology, natural resources, forestry, chemistry, or agriculture major fields of study.

Since the OPM audit, the FS has become cognizant of OPM regulations that have resulted in difficulty qualifying employees from the GS-0462 to GS-0401 series due to specialized experience requirements. The GS-0301 series will eliminate these regulatory barriers for higher level career enhancement currently associated with the GS-0462 and GS-0401 series.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF UTILIZING THE 0301 SERIES?

- The GS-301 series better bridges the gap between fire program management and emergency management.

- The GS-0301 series eliminates regulatory barriers that have caused difficulty in filling key positions, and allows classification and grading of positions in compliance with OPM regulations.
- The GS-0301 series allows for a progressive career pathway for technicians skilled in fire operations and program management to move into leadership and managerial positions.
- The GS-0301 series does not limit education and training to specific fields in biology, natural resource, forestry, chemistry, or agricultural sciences for career development.
- The GS-0301 series allows the Forest Service to fill critical leadership positions in the near-term while the longer-term solution of developing a unique Wildland Firefighter Occupational Series can be accomplished.

WHAT SOLUTIONS FOR RESTRUCTURING ARE BEING CONSIDERED?

At the March 2011 Summit, FAM, HRM, and NFFE-FSC convened a task group to develop an Occupational Series Template that will meet current OPM Qualification Standards requirements, and to ensure that fire management skills and experience remain integral parts of career pathways in FAM.

The plan has two phases: *near-term* and *long-term*.

Near-Term:

- The Occupational Series Template (see Enclosure to Chief Tidwell's memo) describes the *near-term* phase of the plan.
- Leadership believes the Template will provide viable employee career ladders and a sustainable workforce that comply with OPM regulations.

Long-Term

- As described in the Chief's Cultural Transformation Plan, FAM, HRM and NFFE-FSC will work with USDA and OPM to seek development of a unique occupational series for Forest Service wildland firefighters and fire managers; this is the *long-term* phase of the plan.

ELT approved the restructuring plan in April 2011.

WHO ARE THE AFFECTED EMPLOYEES, AND WHAT ARE THE IDENTIFIED REGULATORY ISSUES:

Firefighters:

- At present, approximately 80-85% of the current FAM workforce (10,200 employees) can be hired using the existing GS-0462 NSPDs and Open Continuous Rosters (OCRs) without affecting any changes.
- The NSPDs currently in use for GS-0462 Forestry Technicians series includes IHC, Helitack, Smokejumpers, T2 hand crews, Engines, and IA Dispatch positions, and remain valid for agency firefighters ranging from grades GS-02 thru GS-09.
- Continued use of the GS-0462 Forestry Technician series at these grade levels does not present any issues that contravene OPM's GS-0462 Forestry Technician classification standards.
- GS-7, GS-8, or GS-9 grade levels now considered the critical juncture in an employee's career development when they should begin transition into the GS-0301 or GS-0401 series if they wish to progress into higher level positions.

- The Occupational Series Template eliminates the career pathways for GS-0462 forestry technicians to the GS-11 level and above, and all GS-11 and above positions are to be classified in one of the other occupational series (0301, 0401, 1712, 2101, etc, depending on classification of duties).

FAM Managers:

- Under the near-term strategy, most of the managerial positions in FAM that are currently classified in the GS-0462 or GS-0401 series will be re-classified into the GS-0301 Administrative/Managerial occupation series.
- OPM Qualification Standards do not support the GS-0462 series for grades GS-11 and 12. Per the Chief Tidwell's July 8, 2011 memo, use of the GS-0462 series at these grade levels is to be immediately discontinued and managerial positions will be reclassified in the GS-0301 series.
- Following the 2009 OPM audit the agency now feels that the GS-0401 series is not the appropriate occupational series for the majority of FAM manager duties due to:
 - The paramount knowledge to perform fire managerial duties can also be derived from National Wildland Coordinating Group (NWCG) training, and is not restricted to knowledge that is uniquely acquired from a degree in biology, natural resources, forestry, chemistry, or agricultural sciences from an accredited college or university.
 - The primary purpose of a fire manager is to bridge the gap between natural resource land management and emergency management and provide for safe operations.
 - OPM has informed the Forest Service that there needs to be a distinct separation of the technician and professional career pathways, and moving from a technician to a professional position cannot continue to be implemented as it has been in the past.
 - This has resulted in a concern that future recruitment source for managers would be in jeopardy if they are classified in the GS-0401 series as the majority of subordinate FAM workforce is in the technician series.
- The FS has concluded that the GS-0301 Administrative/Managerial occupational series most accurately describes the primary duties of a fire manager located on a Forest, Regional Office, or at the National Office.
- Positions such as a Forest/District Fire Management Officers (FMO), Forest/District AFMO, Dispatch Managers, Smokejumper Managers, and FAM program managers at the Regional Office and National Office will be re-classified into the GS-0301 series.
- Approximately 40-50 positions will be re-classified in the GS-0301 series. This reclassification is a high priority for FAM and HRM to complete.
- Fourteen GS-0301 NSPDs for seven FAM positions at the GS-12 and GS-13 grade levels were developed in the spring of 2011, and have been submitted to USDA for firefighter retirement coverage determination.
- The new GS-0301 NSPDs are expected to be available for use by mid-summer of 2011 pending USDA and OPM approval.
- Until the remaining GS-0301 NSPDs at the GS-09 and 11 levels become available, the existing GS-0462 NSPDs may continue to be used to fill current and future vacancies.
- Due to historical practices, FAM currently has approximately 350-400 employees in GS-0462 position descriptions at the GS-11 and GS-12 grade levels. The agency will reassign these incumbents to appropriate series as soon as possible in order to comply with OPM regulations.
- Program Managers represent approximately 10% of the Forest Service's FAM workforce at the Forest level (or 1,200 employees), and 2% (or 300 employees) at the Regional and National level.

Natural Resource Specialists:

- The GS-0401 Natural Resource / Fire Management Specialist series is appropriate for positions that require scientific/professional knowledge commensurate with a degree in biology, natural resources, forestry, chemistry, and agriculture to perform duties in vegetation management, ecosystem restoration planning, and/or environmental analyses for development of land management plans.
- The GS-0401 series will be used to classify GS-09 thru 15 grade levels fuels specialists and fire ecologist positions at the Forest, Regional Office, and National Office. These positions represent approximately 2% of the FAM workforce (250-300 positions).
- Specialized experience requirements for GS-11 and above positions in the GS-0401 Supplemental Qualification Standard are currently written in such a way that block applicants at the RO and WO levels due to the specificity of required program elements. FAM and HRM are working with the DOI bureaus to propose revisions to the specialized experience language in the Supplemental Standards to remove this barrier at higher grade levels.