

**U.S. Office of Personnel Management**  
**Office of Merit Systems Oversight and Effectiveness**  
**Classification Appeals and ELSA Programs**



San Francisco Oversight Division  
120 Howard Street, Room 760  
San Francisco, CA 94105

Signed by Denis J. Whitebook  
Denis J. Whitebook  
Classification Appeals Officer

March 23, 1998  
Date

**Classification Appeal Decision**  
**Under Section 5112 of Title 5, United States Code**

**Appellant:** [Appellant's name]

**Agency classification:** Landscape Architect  
GS-807-12

**Organization:** [Appellant's activity]  
[agency sub-element]  
Department of the Interior  
[City, state]

**OPM decision:** Landscape Architect  
GS-807-12

**OPM decision number:** C- 0807-12-01

As provided in section 511.612 of title 5, Code of Federal Regulations, this decision constitutes a certificate that is mandatory and binding on all administrative, certifying, payroll, disbursing, and accounting officials of the government. The agency is responsible for reviewing its classification decisions for identical, similar, or related positions to ensure consistency with this decision. There is no right of further appeal. This decision is subject to discretionary review only under conditions and time limits specified in the Introduction to the Position Classification Standards, appendix 4, section G (address provided in appendix 4, section H).

**Decision sent to:**

[Appellant's name and address]

[Address of appellant's servicing personnel office]

Director of Personnel  
U.S. Department of the Interior  
Mail Stop 5221  
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## **Introduction**

On January 12, 1998, the San Francisco Oversight Division of the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM) received a classification appeal from [the appellant]. His position is currently classified as Landscape Architect, GS-807-12. The appellant agrees that his position description (PD) 10190-5 is adequate and that his position is properly classified as a Landscape Architect, GS-807. However, he believes the grade level should be GS-13. The appellant works in [his activity] [agency sub-element], Department of the Interior, [a city and state]. We have accepted and decided his appeal under section 5112 of title 5, United States Code (U.S.C.).

## **General issues**

The appellant compares his current responsibilities to former ones. He believes that his current position has accreted significant responsibilities associated with construction projects and the management and coordination of regional architectural/engineering contracts. In addition, he notes an increase in the complexity of his assigned construction projects. By law, we must classify positions solely by comparing their current duties and responsibilities to OPM standards and guidelines (5 U.S.C. 5106, 5107, and 5112). Since comparison to standards is the exclusive method for classifying positions, we cannot compare the appellant's current responsibilities to former ones as a basis for deciding his appeal.

The appellant submitted position descriptions and vacancy announcements for higher graded positions he feels are comparable to his current position. As stated above, by law, we must classify positions solely by comparing their current duties and responsibilities to OPM standards and guidelines. Since comparison to standards is the exclusive method for classifying positions, we cannot compare the appellant's current responsibilities to other position descriptions or vacancy announcements as a basis for deciding his appeal.

The appellant mentions his personal qualifications, including his [credentials] and his [years] of experience. Qualifications are considered in classifying positions. However, these are qualifications required to perform current duties and responsibilities, not qualifications that appellants personally possess. Therefore, we could not consider the appellant's personal qualifications, except insofar as they were required to perform his current duties and responsibilities. To the extent that they were needed for this purpose, we considered them.

In reaching our classification decision, we have carefully reviewed all information furnished by the appellant and his agency, including his official PD.

## **Position information**

The appellant is a landscape architect for the [agency sub-element] in [a region including six states]. He provides professional services including land use planning, site planning, architectural design, architect/engineering project management, and construction management. The appellant supports managers at more than 100 national wildlife refuges and 13 national fish hatcheries. The appellant's

official PD and the other material of record furnish much more information about his duties and responsibilities and how they are performed.

### **Series, title, and standard determination**

We find that the appellant's position is properly covered by the Landscape Architect Series, GS-807, titled Landscape Architect, and graded using the GS-807 standard. Neither the agency nor the appellant disagrees.

### **Grade determination**

The landscape architect standard uses two classification factors: Difficulty of assignments and Responsibility of the position. Our evaluation with respect to those factors follows.

#### *Difficulty of assignments*

The difficulty of the appellant's assignments is best evaluated at GS-12. For example:

- As required at the GS-12 level, the appellant is recognized as a mature professional worker equipped to deal with advanced aspects of landscape architecture. The appellant provides unique regional support to managers at over 100 national wildlife refuges and 13 national fish hatcheries with emphasis on situations that require innovative leadership. He must rely on his past experience and professional knowledge to accomplish projects.
- GS-12 Landscape architects' assignments are extensive in scope and importance, contain many difficult features, and are largely involved in planning and coordination. Likewise, the appellant's assignments are extensive in scope and importance. He provides professional consulting services from conceptual design through construction management on a wide variety of projects. The appellant's assignments contain many difficult features which require highly original problem-solving. Also, his assignments are largely involved in site planning and coordination of regional contracts for the planning, design, and construction management of facilities between [agency sub-element] and private architect/engineering firms.
- At the GS-12 level, typical assignments require the special knowledge and skill of a senior landscape architect; e.g., the ability to handle advanced landscape architectural problems such as unusual and varying factors of climate and terrain, and the ability to coordinate the activities of a number of groups effectively. The appellant's assignments are throughout [his region] which includes a wide range of climates and terrains. The appellant provides innovative leadership in project identification, project planning, and conceptual design. He must handle complex project coordination with other Federal agencies, state agencies, and local and private organizations. The appellant's coordination responsibilities are complicated by the need to consider conflicting program objectives, to obtain a consensus from individuals

with a variety of backgrounds and responsibilities, and to obtain public involvement in the planning process.

The appellant states that his position description is consistent with the GS-13 level criteria. For instance, he references the GS-13 criterion that states that some positions at this level act as professional advisors to field office staff serving a large geographical area containing diversified developments in this country and/or abroad. While the appellant functions as a planning consultant, designer, and project manager to managers throughout [his region], the criteria must be read within the context of the entire factor. The factor envisions GS-13 level work being performed at the agency (in this case, the Department of the Interior) level. The appellant's position is not consistent with the GS-13 level criteria because he provides services to [his region] of the [agency sub-element] rather than at the agency level.

The appellant believes that as a specialist in planning and design of natural resource areas he meets the GS-13 level description of landscape architects as specialists in their area of work. Again, this requirement must be read within the context of the entire factor. Landscape architects at this level typically perform such duties as representing the agency at meetings with high-ranking professional personnel from other agencies and organizations requiring negotiation on the part of the GS-13 landscape architect to reconcile diverse points of view. While the appellant may be a specialist in planning and design of natural resource areas and must coordinate projects with other Federal agencies, conduct negotiations, and reconcile diverse points of view, his assignments are primarily for [his region]. He does not regularly represent the Department of the Interior at meetings with high-ranking professional personnel from other agencies and organizations.

At the GS-13 level landscape architects are typically responsible for the development of requirements and schedules for the preparation of plans on an agency-wide basis and for coordination of the review of the various phases of landscape planning within the agency. As discussed above, the appellant's assignments are not Department of the Interior-wide but rather primarily affect planning for the [his region].

At the GS-13 level, landscape architects require extensive knowledge of agency policies, aims, objectives, and of existing legislation and program requirements of the agency. This is much broader than that required by the appellant's position. The appellant's position requires the knowledge necessary to perform as the regional authority in the planning and design of public use facilities on national wildlife refuges and national fish hatcheries. It does not require extensive knowledge of Department of the Interior policies, aims, and objectives, or a knowledge of existing legislation.

As discussed above, the appellant's assignments do not meet GS-13 criteria for Difficulty of assignments. Therefore, the appellant's assignments are best evaluated at GS-12 for Difficulty of assignments.

### *Responsibility of the position*

The appellant's responsibilities are most similar to GS-12 responsibilities described in the standard. At that level technical decisions and recommendations are seldom changed by higher authority. The appellant fully meets and even exceeds this criterion. His recommendations are utilized without review or modification, and his work products are provided directly to clients without supervisory review.

At the GS-12 level personal contacts constitute a substantial portion of the work. The landscape architect must coordinate work and maintain liaison with organizations performing related work; planners, architects, engineers, builders, and contractors; State and municipal authorities; related agencies; and the general public. Likewise, the appellant frequently coordinates complex projects which require that he personally contact and consult with [agency sub-element] employees at all levels, other Federal and State agencies, manufacturers' representatives, contractors, private architectural/engineering firms, private consultants, special interest groups, and concerned citizens.

The appellant's responsibilities do not fully meet GS-13 criteria, for two main reasons: most important, careful reading of the landscape architect standard and other OPM guidelines indicates that for a person's level of responsibility to truly meet GS-13 criteria, those responsibilities should be exercised within the context of GS-13 assignments. In discussing the first classification factor, we have found that the appellant's assignments are best evaluated at GS-12.

Secondly, supervision received at the GS-13 level is usually in the form of administrative direction. The appellant makes various statements in support of his belief that this criterion is met. However, we cannot agree that it is. The appellant's supervisor notes that the appellant's site planning projects are negotiated directly with the programs. However, the supervisor also indicates that either he or the Chief, [branch], who is responsible for design and construction projects and with whom he periodically discusses project assignments, assigns the appellant's construction projects early in the fiscal year. The supervisor further states that he makes it a point to meet with staff to discuss project status, scheduling, obligation rates, etc. This indicates that the appellant does not receive solely administrative direction, as is typical at GS-13.

The appellant makes various statements to support his belief that the responsibilities of his position meet the GS-13 level. For instance, he notes that his work is carried out independently and that work products are provided directly to clients without supervisory review. He also describes his responsibilities for consulting and negotiation. However, as discussed in the preceding paragraphs, his responsibilities are most similar to GS-12 responsibilities and on balance fall short of GS-13 criteria. Therefore the Responsibility of the position must be evaluated at GS-12.

### *Summary*

Since the appellant's position is best evaluated at GS-12 with respect to both classification factors, it must be graded at GS-12 overall.

We note that even if the appellant's position had been evaluated at GS-13 for Responsibility of the position, it still would have been properly classified at GS-12 overall. OPM guidelines and previous decisions indicate that if a position is evaluated one grade higher for one classification factor than for the other, the lower of the two grade levels controls the grade of the position as a whole.

**Decision**

The appellant's position is properly classified as Landscape Architect, GS-807-12.