



## Non-Executive Performance Management Frequently Asked Questions on Major Policy Changes for FY 2021

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### New System

#### **Why are we going to a two-tier system?**

USDA has been on a three-tier element rating/five-tier summary rating system since 2007. While there are some advantages to this system, there are challenges as well, including ensuring a degree of consistency across an organization with more than 18,000 supervisors setting expectations for nearly 80,000 employees.

Data from recent years indicate that some organizations within USDA are more demanding in their expectations while others are more lenient, so the level of work required for a particular rating varies widely.

Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey scores also show that:

- A significant number of USDA employees do not know what's expected of them
- Almost a third of our staff don't believe their appraisal is a fair reflection of their performance, and don't know what they need to do to be rated at a particular level
- Two thirds don't agree that differences in performance are recognized in a meaningful way

We are therefore going to use the two-tier system as a “reset”, and an opportunity to develop and put into practice a common definition of what Fully Successful performance really means.

### Ratings

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#### **Does this mean that no matter how well I perform, the highest rating I can get is a Fully Successful?**

Beginning with the 2021 performance year, that is correct. Employees who excel in their contributions are eligible for recognition with Accomplishment Awards.

#### **If an employee's performance plan contains multiple elements, why is an employee rated “Unacceptable” if they are rated “Does Not Meet” in only one element?**

This is not something about which USDA has discretion. 5 CFR 430 prohibits non-critical elements in a two-tier system, and specifies that if a critical element is rated Unacceptable (USDA's element rating of Does Not Meet Fully Successful), the overall rating is Unacceptable.

#### **If an interim rating at the end of a detail is Unacceptable, and the supervisor of record gives the employee a Fully Successful rating for the time under their supervision, what will the rating be? Is it based on length of time of each rating? The most recent takes priority?**

The policy on this has not changed – the decision on how much weight to give an interim rating is entirely the discretion of the rating official at the end of the rating period.

### Performance Plans

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#### **What happens to elements that were non-critical under the five-tier system?**

Performance expectations that were formerly designated non-critical will not automatically become critical. They will have to be examined to determine whether they are such a core expectation of the position as to be considered critical.

#### **Where do we put collateral duties in a performance plan with only critical elements?**

Collateral duties (tasks that are outside of an employee's regular role and responsibilities) should not be included in critical elements, which means they shouldn't be in any plans under the two-tier system. (It's important to note that refusing to carry out a collateral duty

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would still carry conduct-related consequences, so it's important to still do them. They just don't belong in critical elements.)

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**Documenting  
Accomplishments**

**If supervisors only have to prepare narratives for elements that are rated Does Not Meet, and employees are not required to prepare accomplishment reports, what are we supposed to put in the accomplishments box on the appraisal forms?**

The accomplishments boxes will be optional. Remember, supervisors and agencies have the discretion to request accomplishment reports under the new policy, and employees may also voluntarily submit them.

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**Applying to  
Other Jobs**

**Will a rating of Fully Successful put USDA employees at a disadvantage when applying elsewhere?**

Most Federal agencies have experience with a two-tier rating system, and will understand that Fully Successful is the highest rating available. Applicants can document their accomplishments as a means to stand out among the competition.

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**Special Questions  
Related to  
COVID-19**

**Should standards be added related to COVID? For example, if additional cleaning of labs, workspaces, etc. is needed...should that be in the plan?**

The only COVID-related responsibilities that should be in a critical element are those that are core to the primary functions of the position, and for which USDA should downgrade or remove an employee for failing to acceptably perform. Remember that if an employee refuses to carry out collateral duties, there are still conduct-related consequences.

**What do we do with elements/standards which couldn't be performed due to travel restrictions from the COVID-19 pandemic?**

If an employee fails to perform expectations because of circumstances that are entirely outside of their control (whether a pandemic, lack of funding, etc.), it can have no impact on the element rating - the supervisor should simply document in a note on the performance plan why the particular expectation wasn't accomplished.

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