

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
FOOD SAFETY AND INSPECTION SERVICE
WASHINGTON, DC

FSIS NOTICE

49-21

10/25/21

FY 2021 QUALITY STEP INCREASE INSTRUCTIONS

I. PURPOSE

This notice provides instructions on how FSIS Program Areas are to complete their Fiscal Year (FY) 2021 Quality Step Increase (QSI) nominations for their employees. [Departmental Regulation \(DR\) 4040-430, Employee Performance Management](#) sets forth the policies for the USDA QSI process. This notice covers the FY 2021 performance rating cycle, ending September 30, 2021.

II. BACKGROUND

In October of 2020, guidance was provided to program areas about the significant policy changes for QSIs in an FSIS User Notice from the Administrator. The changes were in response to USDA's new two-tier performance appraisal system, which does not include a rating of Outstanding to identify a limited population of employees who are eligible for a QSI. An overview of the awards policy changes can be found [here](#).

III. ELIGIBILITY

A. QSIs are reserved for the most exceptional performance. No single accomplishment merits a QSI; it may be granted only to those employees who have demonstrated sustained exceptional performance, commensurate with the classification of the employee's position, over at least an 18-month period in the same grade and type of position.

B. Employees are to meet the following criteria to be considered eligible for a QSI:

1. Be at the full performance level of their position;
2. Have performed in the same grade and type of position for at least 18 months before the end of the appraisal cycle;
3. Be below step 10 of their grade level;
4. Have received a rating of record of at least Fully Successful in the most recent performance year under the FY 2021 two-tier performance management system. Under the previous performance management system in FY 2019 and 2020, the rating of record would have had to be Outstanding. If the employee has not been in the Federal Government long enough to have three performance ratings, supervisors will use their two most recent performance years;
5. Not have received a QSI within the previous 104 weeks;

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Field Employees

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6. Have demonstrated sustained performance of the highest quality, and demonstrably above the expectations defined at the Fully Successful level of their performance plan in FY 2021, two-tier performance system and Outstanding level under the FY 2019 and 2020 performance management system; and
7. Have attained accomplishments that contributed substantially to the organization's goals, commensurate with the classification of their position.

IV. RECOMMENDATIONS AND ESTABLISHING A REVIEW PANEL

A. Each FSIS Program Area is provided with allocations for the number of QSIs that may be granted. The allocations vary annually.

B. Each Program Area is to establish a review panel to evaluate QSI recommendations and submit a [Form AD-3115, Recommendation and Authorization of Quality Step Increase](#) for each QSI nominee by the due date communicated to the FSIS Management Council via e-mail, which will also include their QSI allocations.

C. The review panel will consist of the Assistant Administrator (AA) or Deputy AA for each Program Area, and the district managers, lab directors, or other program/staff heads in the AA's chain of command.

D. Review panels may consult with their Human Resources Operations (HRO) Staffing Specialist on employee eligibility questions but will not have HRO staff as part of the panel.

E. Recommendation packages for QSIs are to be prepared by either the nominee's first level or second level supervisor and submitted to the panel for review. The packages are to include:

1. [Form AD-3115, Recommendation and Authorization of Quality Step Increase](#); and
2. The three most recent consecutive ratings of record, or two ratings of record if the employee has not been in the Federal Government long enough to have three performance ratings.

F. The AA is to provide final approval for their respective Program Area's QSI nominations.

V. SUBMITTING RECOMMENDATIONS

Designated Program Area points of contact are to submit completed and signed QSI packages to the FSIS Awards mailbox at FSISAwards@usda.gov by the due date.

VI. QUESTIONS

Refer questions regarding this notice to FSISAwards@usda.gov.



Assistant Administrator
Office of Policy and Program Management