
SUBJECT: NASS Performance Appraisal Program

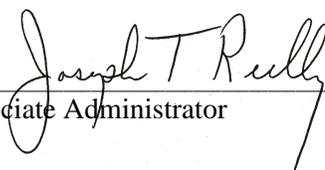
EFFECTIVE: September 10, 2010

EXPIRES: September 10, 2015

FOR ACTION BY: Field Offices and Headquarters Units

REFERENCE: REE Policy and Procedure, 435.2-NASS

APPROVED BY:


Associate Administrator

I. PURPOSE

This Policy and Standards Memorandum (PSM) discusses the the annual employee performance cycle, and includes the process and procedures for completing and submitting all required paperwork, removing the necessity for yearly operations memorandums on this topic. This PSM replaces PSM-57, which expired September 2008, and works in accordance with REE Policy and Procedure (P&P) 435.2-NASS, NASS Performance Appraisal Program.

Performance appraisal is a management tool designed to encourage communications in the office, improve the quality of work produced, and promote individual accountability. These are the concepts underpinning the legal requirement that all agencies evaluate employee performance. The guidelines contained herein should be used by all supervisors and employees in implementing and executing NASS's Performance Appraisal Program.

II. BACKGROUND

The current employee performance plans have been updated to include a statement that aligns them with the Agency's strategic goals and objectives, resulting in performance plans that are results-focused or that measure expectations in terms of expected results. Because the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) and the Department emphasize performance plans that are results-focused, the Department is currently being scored on this by OPM under the Presidential Management Agenda.

Each individual's performance plan must include "specific goals, tasks, projects, improvements, initiatives, efficiencies, or results" that are to be completed during the rating cycle, with reasonable deadlines for doing so. These need to be outlined and aligned with NASS's Strategic Plan. Each employee will work with his/her supervisor to identify the appropriate goals and measurable outcomes that support and contribute to the Agency's overall performance.

III. COVERAGE

The NASS Performance Appraisal Program covers NASS employees who are reasonably expected to be employed for more than 90 days. Those employees expected to be employed less than 90 days, those employed as trainees under a work-study appointment or under temporary appointments, and those in long term training programs are excluded from this program. Those in the Senior Executive Service are covered under a separate performance program and also are excluded from this program. Refer to the P&P for additional details.

IV. NASS PERFORMANCE APPRAISAL PERIOD

Supervisors will formally evaluate covered employees once every 12 months. The normal appraisal rating period begins October 1 (or the date when an employee starts a new job) and ends September 30 the following year.

Appraisal periods must be at least 90 days in length in order for employees to be rated. When the rating year ends before an employee has had performance standards in place for the minimum appraisal period of 90 days, the supervisor will extend the appraisal period for the length of time needed to meet the 90-day requirement. When the new target date is reached, the supervisor will prepare a rating of record for the employee.

V. ESTABLISHING AND COMMUNICATING PERFORMANCE PLANS

Upon an employee's assignment to a position and at the beginning of the appraisal period thereafter, (normally within 30 days), the rating official will meet with the employee to establish and discuss a written performance plan (elements and standards). Generic performance plans have been established for NASS positions, with required and optional standards for each element. OPM requirements result in periodic updates to these plans. Therefore, supervisors should review the latest templates on NASSnet each year to ensure their performance plans include the appropriate standards. These performance plans may be tailored to reflect specific responsibilities unique to the unit or position, if necessary, but deviating from the generic performance plan must be put in writing and approved by the Rating and Reviewing Officials prior to implementation.

If one or more major duties and/or responsibilities of a position change, the performance plan should be reviewed to determine if it needs to be changed. Changes to performance plans must be in writing and must be approved by the rating and reviewing official prior to implementation. Supervisors must complete an interim performance appraisal for employees who are transferred to a different position during the rating year. This advisory rating will be sent to the employee's new supervisor who should use it in evaluating the employee's performance for the entire year. Refer to Section 6 of the P&P, 435.2-NASS for more details on the responsibilities of the rating and reviewing officials and Section 10 for additional guidance for supervisors on advisory ratings and special situations.

Generic Performance Elements and Standards

Performance elements describe what the employee is expected to do. NASS has established 5 generic elements and standards for both supervisors and employees of which 3 are critical and 2 are non-critical. The above table outlines the generic elements and their determination of critical and non-critical.

The first critical element for supervisors is Leadership, Supervision, and Project Management. For non-supervisors, the first critical element is Teamwork, Equal Opportunity/Civil Rights (EO/CR) and

Project Management. A second critical element for both supervisors and non-supervisors will be for demonstrating support for Mission Results and Goal Accomplishment. This relates to completing work goals aligned with the NASS/REE/USDA strategic goals and the NASS Agency Goals. The third critical element is EO/CR principles for supervisors, and Technical and Analytical Performance for non-supervisors. The last two elements, with noncritical weights for all employees, are Customer Service and Communications and Initiative and Innovation. All employees are responsible for showing initiative and innovation or adaptability that adds value to their work assignments without constant supervision.

Supervisory Elements	Non-supervisory Elements	Weight
Leadership, Supervision, and Project Management	Teamwork, EO/CR and Project Management	Critical
Mission Results and Goal Accomplishment	Mission Results and Goal Accomplishment	Critical
Equal Opportunity and Civil Rights	Technical and Analytical Performance	Critical
Customer Service and Communications	Customer Service and Communications	Non-critical
Initiative and Innovation	Initiative and Innovation	Non-critical

The Mission Results and Goal Accomplishment element is key to linking and aligning Agency goals to individual performance. The NASS FY Goals document has been developed for this specific purpose and will be updated and maintained by Headquarters. Goals must be included in the employee's performance plan for this particular element and they must come from this document in order to show how the individual's performance contributes to the success of the Agency's overall performance. Performance measures associated with each goal will be negotiated between the supervisor and employee, unless otherwise dictated by State and National performance targets (or other measurement processes) established by Headquarters. State and National performance measures and targets will be updated annually, normally, at the beginning of the rating year. A process for updating and maintaining the goals document will be posted on the NASSnet.

Office goals and performance measures can be developed and included in the other 4 performance elements, as deemed necessary by the supervisor. The NASS FY Goals can be used for these elements, as needed.

A critical element is defined as an assignment or responsibility of such importance that receiving an unacceptable performance in that element would result in an overall unacceptable rating and definitive remedial action must be taken. A non-critical element is defined as an aspect of individual, team, or organizational performance exclusive of a critical element that is used to assign a summary level. Unlike the critical element, receiving an unacceptable performance for a non-critical element will not result in an overall minimally acceptable rating. The supervisor should work closely with the employee to assist them in improving their performance, especially for any element that is rated Does Not Meet Fully Successful. Refer to the Section 10 of the P&P, Assisting Employees in Improving Performance.

A **performance standard** is a measure to tell the employee how well they have to perform/accomplish their work to meet a desired level of performance. NASS performance standards are only defined at the Fully Successful level.

Additional factors to consider in determining the rating for each element:

- Assessment of the employee's actual contribution to the teamwork required to meet the Department's and/or agency mission, strategic goals, and management initiatives;
- Setting and achieving professional, team, and project goals that promote growth and career development;
- Satisfaction given to both internal and external customers and promoting the principles of the NASS core values;
- (Supervisors) Effectiveness, productivity, and performance of the employees for whom a manager is responsible; and, recognition given employees based on performance;
- Personal initiative and drive to improve efficiency and effectiveness in the Agency; and,
- Commitment to affirmative action, equal employment opportunity, diversity, and the merit system principles set forth under Section 2301 of Title 5, United States Code.

NASS has established generic performance plans for certain NASS positions. In unusual cases, plans may be tailored to reflect specific responsibilities unique to the unit or position. Deviating from the generic plans requires approval by the Eastern or Western Field Officer Director or Division Director. Refer to Section 7 of the P&P, 435.2-NASS for more details on performance elements and standards.

VI. PROGRESS REVIEWS

Supervisors should provide feedback to employees throughout the year on their performance and performance-related issues. Supervisors are required to perform at least one progress review during the appraisal period, usually at the midpoint of the rating year in March and/or April. Refer to Section 8 of the P&P, 435.2-NASS for more details on progress reviews.

Performance Feedback Form 435F

The performance feedback form is an optional administrative form to be completed by supervisors for each employee for the interim rating and at the end of the rating year. However, it can be used as often during the year as needed. It is a tool designed to aid in the rating process, and is intended to foster "open" and honest discussion of the employee's performance during the performance appraisal. Copies of the form(s) are maintained in the supervisor's files. This form has been posted on the NASSnet and can be downloaded using this link: ([NASS-435F form](#)).

Each factor rated will use a continuous scale from low to high. Other factors, such as meets or exceeds job requirements, amount of supervision required, and willingness to take on additional responsibilities in relation to performance against job duties and responsibilities, should also be considered.

VII. ANNUAL APPRAISAL PROCESS

The Required Documents

The following documents are used in the NASS Employee Performance Appraisal Program. Note that many of these documents are handled exclusively by supervisors.

- Employee listings (supervisors only): Prior to the start of the annual employee performance ratings period, NASS supervisors will be sent a listing of all employees for their HQ unit or

FO for them to use to certify that the Annual Performance Appraisal has been completed for each of their employees. It will have columns by each employee name for the supervisor to initial and date.

- Performance Plan, NASS 435-A, with the attached 435-B pages--Performance Plan, Progress Review, and Appraisal Worksheet.
- Performance Appraisal Summary Rating Form, NASS 435-P (the sheet with the rating details and the signatures). A signed hard copy of the NASS 435P must be retained by the immediate supervisor in an Employee Performance Folder.
- Employee Accomplishments Reports Form, 435-C.
- Recommendation and Approval of Awards Form, AD-287-2.
- Preliminary Employee Ratings Spreadsheet (supervisors only). This worksheet will be completed by supervisors and contain **summary counts only** of preliminary employee performance ratings for their office. These spreadsheets are forwarded to HQ for summarization and review by the Senior Executive Team (SET).
- A separate justification, written by the supervisor, must be provided for those employees rated as “Unacceptable” and those employees who will receive a “QSI” (see Section IV., item D2a). For all other employees, only the Accomplishments Reports Form is needed (item D., above).

Electronic versions of all of the forms are posted on the NASSnet and can be downloaded at http://nassnet/library/info/hrd/perform_appraisal/index.html. Examples of appraisal forms NASS-435P, AD-435A, and AD-435B are also included in the P&P.

Forms AD-435A and AD-435B will be used to certify the establishment of the employee’s performance plan. It should be signed and dated upon development and initialed and dated upon progress review. The Performance Feedback form, Form 435F, is optional and should be used for the interim and final appraisal discussions for covered employees. A copy is filed in the supervisor’s files and one copy is given to the employee.

Forms 435P, AD-435A/B, 435C (the accomplishments report) or other written justification for “outstanding” and/or the written justification for “unacceptable” performance must be submitted.

All other documentation should be retained in the supervisor’s file. After review of AD-435P, it will be sent to NASS Budget Administrative Service Office (BASO) who will then forward it to the office of Administration and Financial Management (AFM), Human Resources Division (HRD) who will input the information in a NFC database and file a copy in the official

Employee Listings

Each supervisor will be sent an electronic employee listing for their office that identifies those employees who require ratings this performance cycle. Supervisors will complete the listing for each employee in their unit, certifying that the Annual Performance Appraisal was completed for each employee in their unit. Supervisors will be able to make updates to the listings.

Accomplishments Reports

Near the end of the appraisal period, each employee must provide an accomplishment report using Form 435-C to his/her supervisor that documents specific accomplishments made during the year. The report should document the scope and impact of the employee's performance relative to the five rating elements, reflecting work performed throughout the rating cycle of October 1-September 30. The accomplishment report should be no more than two pages. Form 435-C is located on NASSnet at http://nassnet/library/info/hrd/perform_appraisal/docs/accomp_report_form.doc. Attachment A lists questions that guide the employee in documenting accomplishments.

The supervisor will use this report as an important component in determining an employee's rating of record and should be referred to during the performance discussion with the employee. An employee must be appraised on each element in the performance plan unless the employee has had insufficient opportunity to demonstrate performance in the element.

Performance Ratings

Employees who have been in their positions and under a Performance Plan for 90 calendar days or more are ratable and must receive an appraisal using the Performance Appraisal Summary Rating Form, NASS 435-P. If an employee has not been covered under a Performance Plan for the minimum appraisal period of 90 calendar days as of September 30, the appraisal period for that employee should be extended to meet the 90 day requirement, at which time the employee must receive a rating of record.

Trainees employed under the Student Career Experience Program (SCEP) follow the same procedures as a permanent employee.

Employees who are in a full-time training program within the rating period, but performed their duties in their permanent position under a performance plan for a period of at least 90 days should receive a rating for that time. The rating will be based on the performance and contributions made by the employee while in his or her permanent position performing under an approved performance plan. The time spent in full-time training is not reflected in the rating.

Employees who transfer to a different position during the rating year should receive an interim performance appraisal before leaving their current position if under standards for a minimum of 90 days. This interim appraisal should be sent to the employee's new supervisor and used by them to help evaluate the employee's performance for the entire performance cycle.

An employee's signature on the NASS 435-P Form only constitutes receipt of the appraisal. An employee's signature on the form does not mean the employee agrees with the rating given. If an employee chooses not to sign their appraisal, a note should be written in the employee's signature box stating "Performance review was held on (date) and the employee declined to sign." In order to effectively assist an employee who is dissatisfied with the performance rating received, supervisors should contact the servicing Employee Relations Specialist.

The supervisor will evaluate each performance element and determine which of the following three rating levels is most appropriate when comparing the employee's performance with the Fully Successful performance standard established for that element. The rating levels are:

- **Exceeds Fully Successful:** This level generally describes performance that exceeds the Fully Successful standard for the element being evaluated. Employees performing at this level may display initiative, ownership, and/or unusual independence.
- **Meets Fully Successful:** This level generally describes the performance of the solid, effective employee whose work meets normal expectations in terms of quantity, quality, timeliness, and customer service, as outlined in the Fully Successful standard.
- **Does Not Meet Fully Successful:** This level describes performance that has failed to fulfill the basic expectation for the work. With assistance from the Human Resources Division, the rating official must prepare a written statement describing the employee's deficiencies for all elements rated at this level. Early identification and correction of poor performance is strongly recommended.

A five summary rating system summarizes the employees overall performance and is calculated using the Decision Table on the NASS-435P form using a weighting system that is built into the calculation. Critical elements have a weight of "2" and non-critical elements have a weight of "1". The summary levels are:

- **Outstanding:** All appraisal units for critical and non-critical elements were earned at the Exceeds Fully Successful level. For each Outstanding rating, the rating official must prepare a written justification outlining the employee's accomplishments or provide a copy of the employee's complete accomplishment report and submit it with the NASS 435P.
- **Superior:** More appraisal units for critical and non-critical elements were earned at the Exceeds Fully Successful level than at the Meets Fully Successful level. None of the elements were rated Does Not Meet Fully Successful.
- **Fully Successful:** None of the critical elements were rated Does Not Meet Fully Successful. The appraisal rating falls between Superior and Minimally Acceptable.
- **Minimally Acceptable:** More appraisal units (for non-critical elements only) were earned at the Does Not Meet Fully Successful level than at the Exceeds Fully Successful level, and no critical element was rated Does Not Meet Fully Successful.
- **Unacceptable:** One or more critical elements were rated Does Not Meet Fully Successful. Should this occur, the supervisor must contact their Employee Relations Specialist for guidance.

A written narrative justification providing additional details about the employee's performance must be prepared by the supervisor in only two cases, as specified below. These auxiliary supervisory justifications must accompany the Performance Appraisal Summary Rating Form (435-P).

Case 2: A QSI is recommended.

Case 2: The employee receives an "Unacceptable" rating, which means that one or more "critical" elements are rated as "Does Not Meet Fully Successful." Supervisors should contact their Employee Relations Specialist in this instance.

Once a summary rating has been established by the supervisor, the supervisor will sign the form and discuss with the reviewing official. It is important that this action take place before the employee sees the rating or is engaged in any discussion concerning the rating. After the reviewing official and approving official have agreed with the rating, the supervisor will discuss the rating with the

employee. Refer to Section 9 of the P&P, 435.2-NASS for more details on the annual appraisal process, rating, and summary levels.

Guidelines for assisting employees in improving performance and handling special situations and employee dissatisfactions are documented in Section 10 of the P&P, 435.2-NASS.

VIII. RECOGNIZING PERFORMANCE

Performance Bonus Awards

A performance-based summary rating provides a monetary award for sustained employee contributions that exceed standards. NASS recognizes exceptional staff performance with three levels of recognition. Separate award amounts are given for the performance bonus summary ratings of: 1.) Outstanding, 2.) Superior, and 3.) Qualifying Fully Successful (which means two or more appraisal points at “Exceeds Fully Successful,” and none at “Does Not Meet”). Specific performance bonus dollar amounts are set annually by the NASS Administrator.

Ratings	Exceeds	Meet	Does Not Meet	Qualify for Bonus	Accomplishments Reports Required with Performance Appraisal
Outstanding	8	0	0	Yes	Accomplishments Report
Superior	7	1	0	Yes	Accomplishments Report
Superior	6	2	0	Yes	Accomplishments Report
Superior	5	3	0	Yes	Accomplishments Report
Fully Successful	4	4	0	Yes	Accomplishments Report
Fully Successful	3	5	0	Yes	Accomplishments Report
Fully Successful	2	6	0	Yes	Accomplishments Report
Fully Successful	1	7	0	No	None
Fully Successful	0	8	0	No	None
Minimally Acceptable*			No Critical Element	No	None
Unacceptable			Any Critical Element	No	Supervisor’s Written Justification

* If “Does Not Meet” is greater than “Exceeds” and no critical elements are marked as “Does Not Meet.” For further explanation, see Form 435-P’s section 16B, Decision Table.

The NASS Administrator provides performance bonus dollar amounts for “Outstanding,” “Superior,” and “Qualifying Fully Successful (QFS).” A bonus for QFS occurs when an employee receives at least 2 appraisal points in the “Exceeds” column. The Awards Form AD-287-2, Recommendation and Approval of Awards, must be prepared for each bonus or QSI nomination. For Field Offices, the Recommending Individual (block 20) will be the Deputy Director; the Reviewing Official (block 21) will be the State Director. HQ-FO will sign as the Approving Official. For bonuses to Deputy Directors and Administrative Technicians, the Recommending Individual will be the State Director and HQ-FO will review and approve.

For HQ units, the Recommending Individual will be the Section Head; the Branch Chief will be the Reviewing Official; the Division Director will be the Approving Official.

Quality Step Increases (QSIs)

A Quality Step Increase (QSI) may be recommended only for those employees who receive an "Outstanding" rating, who have not received a QSI within 52 weeks, and who have not been promoted or reassigned to a different position since October 1. Supervisors must indicate their QSI recommendation on their Preliminary Employee Ratings Spreadsheet for their FOs or HQ unit, which will be sent in to the HQ OA HRSO official mailbox by supervisors by the required date for the year, as these must be approved in advance by the NASS Administrator. QSIs are given in the position and at the grade level for which performance was assessed. Note that QSIs to the 4th and 7th steps of a grade extend the employee's current within-grade waiting period by one year. For specific questions regarding QSIs, refer to the HQ OA HRSO staff, or to your AFM-HRD contact.

A citation must be provided in Block 11 of the Awards Form (AD-287-2), for bonus awards and QSIs using the following citation: "This award is based upon an official performance appraisal rating of [*Fully Successful, Superior, or Outstanding*] for the rating period ending September 30, [appropriate year]." An additional supervisory written justification must accompany the employee Accomplishments Reports for those employees who are recommended for a QSI.

Preliminary Employee Ratings Spreadsheet (supervisors only)

NASS will employ a Preliminary Ratings Approval Process. This is a process where the tentative ratings formulated by rating and reviewing officials will undergo a review by the Human Resources Council (HRC) for consistency across the Agency and comparison/evaluation to the achievement of overall Agency goals. An Excel spreadsheet, provided by the HQ OA HRSO, is completed by supervisors and returned to HQ for preliminary review. Supervisors will send the completed ratings summary information in the spreadsheets back to the HQ OA HRSO official mailbox, where the summaries will be consolidated and provided to the HRC for review and approval. After the HRC review, the final ratings summaries information will be communicated to supervisors. At that time, adjustments to final employee appraisal and performance bonus forms, if any, should be made, performance discussion held with employees, performance appraisal forms signed by employees and supervisors, and the packages submitted to HQ as specified in the next section.

IX. PREPARING THE FINAL PERFORMANCE PACKAGE

Supervisors are responsible for preparing the final performance packages for their unit, and sending them in to HQ according to the schedule. The final package should contain the following and needs to be stapled together in the specified order and sent to the HQ OA HRSO by the last week in October. Each year, the OA will prepare and distribute a schedule of events with all due dates specified.

- The Employee Listing certifying the issuance of the performance ratings should be the cover sheet of the entire package for that FO or HQ unit. The Employee Listing should be followed by the needed documents for each employee in the unit:
 - Original AD-287-2, Recommendation and Approval of Awards Form;
 - Original 435-P, the Performance Appraisal rating form, with accompanying signatures;
 - Original AD-435-C, Accomplishments Report, along with any needed auxiliary supervisory justifications;

- Original AD-435-A, Performance Plan, the first page only (one with the signatures), for the current fiscal year cycle; this is the only page that needs to be sent--**the accompanying 435-B pages do not need to be transmitted and should be retained locally.**

Paper copies of the employee's final appraisal, performance bonus, and Accomplishment Report, with all required signatures completed, should be sent to supervisors for their files and a copy given to the employee. The FOs and HQ units must maintain the complete Performance Plan package (435-A, along with the accompanying 435-B pages) for each employee, for a period of 5 years. This document will be needed in the event of an audit, retirement, resignation, separation, etc. Note that Individual Development Plans (IDPs), training forms, or other management documents should not be included in the submitted package, as these are not required documents in the Employee Performance File and will not be kept, even if received.

The HQ OA HRSO will obtain Senior Executive signatures and dates on required forms, account for the performance appraisal and recognition of ratable employees, and forward all forms to AFM-HRD. AFM-HRD will make all performance bonuses received by the required date effective for payout in the chosen pay period of the given year.

X. LOOKING AHEAD:

Supervisors should use their annual performance appraisal meetings with employees as an opportunity to discuss the upcoming year's Performance Plan, since these will need to be put in place and signed sometime during the first 30 days of the new fiscal year's performance cycle (October 1 through September 30), with the target date to have all of them in place by October 30. As performance measures are developed by each work unit and linked to the Agency's overall goals and objectives, the measures should be discussed with employees and integrated into their Performance Plans under Performance Element # 2, Mission Results and Goal Accomplishments.

ATTACHMENT A: Preparing Accomplishment Reports

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Preparing Accomplishment Reports

Why Prepare Accomplishment Reports?

- Serves as a reminder to both the employee and supervisor of individual accomplishments during a performance cycle
- Used to develop and support performance appraisals
- Leads to a more objective, effective appraisal of performance

How Are They Written?

- Limit to 2 pages, if possible
- Arrange by performance element
- Describe the accomplishment
- Describe the impact, result or outcome of accomplishment
- Did it enhance a work process?
- Did it have an impact on a customer?
- Did it help the organization achieve its goals?
- Use performance plan as a guide – address standards
- Use “I” statements
- Use action verbs that describe the specific role in accomplishment
- Refer to activity/status reports, calendars, previous accomplishment reports, etc.
- Avoid laundry lists
- Follow your organization’s policy (some require a description of how the standard is exceeded)
- Proof read your report