



FFAS HUMAN RESOURCES DIVISION NEWSLETTER



Farm and Foreign
Agricultural Services
Human Resources Division

February 2011

Learning at your Fingertips

Mark Nelson, Human Resources Specialist
Leadership and Employee Development Branch

The benefits and returns you receive from time invested in online learning are tremendous. Within USDA this benefit is just a click away, through USDA's Learning Management System, AgLearn.

Learning through AgLearn not only provides a positive and valuable experience for AgLearn Users it offers a cost-benefit for USDA to make the most of our training budget. Online learning enables you to:

- alleviate the time to travel to a site
- advance productivity and self-confidence
- increase engagement and access to information
- manage the date and time to attend

AgLearn users are pleasantly surprised to realize the wealth of learning available at their desktop. I encourage you to continuously explore the benefits and value provided by USDA's Learning Management System and through experiencing the benefits develop a new, exciting, and powerful learning relationship with this system! Through learning, you acquire new skills, and through this acquisition you ultimately improve your business quotient. From this perspective, you can see that when you acquire a new skill, it is yours to keep.

In addition to gaining knowledge in your selected curriculum, other highlighted benefits assist you with completing learning requests and maintaining your learning history. Review this system before going elsewhere to enhance your skills in your desired area. Your benefits from learning will have life-changing effects. If you are marketing yourself at the executive level, then it is important to highlight your learning experiences.

Jumpstart your learning with new courses! SkillSoft has made bountiful resources available to you starting in February. They suggest that you Add exciting titles to your To-Do List such as

- Emergency Response in the Workplace
- Customizing Visual Elements in Excel 2010
- Organizing Data and Objects in Excel 2010
- Formatting E-mail and Configuring Message Options in Outlook 2010
- Workplace Harassment for Supervisors and Managers

[Click here for a complete list of the February releases!](#)

March is National Nutrition Month

Juliet McBride
Worklife Program Manager
Employee/Labor Relations and Benefits Branch

How Field Offices can Get Ready and Stay Tuned

During the month of March, the American Dietetic Association encourages everyone to “Eat Right with Color.” Additional information is forthcoming from your Human Resources Division (HRD) in support of this initiative. Meanwhile, here are a few suggestions to help Field Offices get started at your locations.

- Hold employee contests through recipes, articles, posters, poetry, etc. Have the judges be VIP’s from the workplace. Reward employees.
- Coordinate and hold lunch and learns and invite a speaker.
- Show videos or reference webinars for employees to watch.
- Create a “take one” box and insert nutrition brochures, pamphlets, and tips that employees can take.
- Obtain and share with employees brochures, pamphlets, and tips from reputable and well-known/recognized affiliations. For example, websites such as:
 - My pyramid: www.mypyramid.gov/
 - American Dietetic Association: <http://www.eatright.org/>
 - USDA Food and Nutrition Information Center:
http://fnic.nal.usda.gov/nal_display/index.php?info_center=4&tax_level=1
 - American Heart Association:
http://www.heart.org/HEARTORG/GettingHealthy/NutritionCenter/Nutrition-Center_UCM_001188_SubHomePage.jsp

Note: “*Stay tuned*” for more information to come. Get ready, and get started now on promoting healthy eating. Fiscal year 2011 Worklife and Wellness accomplishments for FFAS will be provided to OPM annually for reporting to the President. These accomplishments will be gleaned from reports provided to HRD from FSA and RMA field offices in the reporting format we request. HRD will issue these reporting guidelines to all offices prior to April 15.

If you need additional information, or have comments, contact the Agency Worklife Program Manager by email at juliet.mcbride@wdc.usda.gov, or by phone at 202-401-0683, TTY 202-205-9057.

FSA Offices Across Montana Supported American Heart Month (February 4)

Preview the following link

http://fsaintranet.sc.egov.usda.gov/states/mt/mti/Wellness/Montana_Wears_Red.pptx

A Simple Lifestyle Change May Bring Lasting Results

Helen Ward
Worklife and Wellness Ambassador
Risk Management Agency, Jackson Regional Office

Individuals making healthy lifestyle changes may be more successful in the long run if they avoid fad dieting and body shocking exercise.

Research shows that lasting weight lost is achieved when the individual sets goals, changes their eating habits, and makes better selections from each food group instead of eliminating foods that are thought to be “bad” but actually may serve nutritional purposes, such as fat and meat proteins. Instead of swearing off sweets and meat, individuals who want to see long term results can observe portion sizes and exhibit control, bearing in mind that too much of anything may not be a good thing.

Exercise is perhaps the most important criteria to achieving lasting results. When executed properly, those seeking to build a better body are more likely to be consistent with exercise that does not cause injury or burnout; as either one of these will cause fatigue and/or derail the “better body” goal. According to the women’s magazine, “A Few of our Favorite Things,” becoming physically fit can be fun. Nutritionists encourage starting off slow and being creative. They recommend that beginners start with low level consistent exercise and gradually increase in vigor and rigor. HealthCentral.com affirms that physical fitness is not all cosmetic. Sure, after losing weight clothes fit better and airplane seats are more comfortable. However, losing the extra weight not only reduces size, it reduces health risk factors such as high blood pressure, diabetes, high cholesterol, heart disease, stroke, and some cancers. Doctors attest that being fit increases your chances of living longer and decreases your chances for disease and health problems.

Being fit also has its fiscal benefits. The money spent on doctor’s visits and medicine can be used elsewhere. For example, individuals wanting fiscal fitness can place saved money into a savings account and let it grow.

Individuals seeking long term significant results can take these steps:

1. Monitor calorie intake; too few calories can cause weight gain.
2. Avoid fad dieting.
3. Set reasonable goals and keep track of what you eat.
4. Exercise and/or include an extra 30 minutes of walking into your daily activities.
5. Avoid the pitfalls of temptation by practicing control, and monitor portions on high calorie highly fating foods.
6. Do not skip meals.
7. Find a workout buddy for encouragement. You’ll work harder knowing someone is depending on you.
8. Significantly reduce fast food consumption. It can be high in trans fat and calories.
9. Increase the intake of fiber and whole grains in your diet. They are filling and satisfying foods.
10. Be patient, yet firm about your lifestyle change. It took time to gain those unwanted pounds, so take your time getting rid of it for good.
11. Remember, a simple lifestyle change may bring lasting results.

Minding your Fiscal Health

Submitted by Maria Rinaldi
Human Resources Assistant
Operations

It's that time of the year again, the income tax filing season has begun and important tax documents should be arriving in the mail. Even though your return is not due until April, getting an early start will make filing easier. Here are the Internal Revenue Service's top 10 tips that will help your tax filing process run smoother than ever this year.

1. **Start gathering your records:** Round up any documents or forms you'll need when filing your taxes: receipts, canceled checks and other documents that support income or deductions you're claiming on your return.
2. **Be on the lookout:** W-2s and 1099s will be coming soon; you'll need these to file your tax return.
3. **Use Free File:** Let Free File do the hard work for you with brand-name tax software or online fillable forms. It's available exclusively at <http://www.irs.gov>. Everyone can find an option to prepare their tax return and e-file it for free. If you made \$58,000 or less, you qualify for free tax software that is offered through a private-public partnership with manufacturers. If you made more or are comfortable preparing your own tax return, there's Free File Fillable Forms, the electronic versions of IRS paper forms. Visit www.irs.gov/freefile to review your options.
4. **Try IRS e-file:** After 21 years, IRS e-file has become the safe, easy and most common way to file a tax return. Last year, 70 percent of taxpayers - 99 million people - used IRS e-file. Starting in 2011, many tax preparers will be required to use e-file and will explain your filing options to you. This is your chance to give it a try. IRS e-file is approaching 1 billion returns processed safely and securely. If you owe taxes, you have payment options to file immediately and pay by the tax deadline. Best of all, combine e-file with direct deposit and you get your refund in as few as 10 days.
5. **Consider other filing options:** There are many different options for filing your tax return. You can prepare it yourself or go to a tax preparer. You may be eligible for free face-to-face help at an IRS office or volunteer site. Give yourself time to weigh all the different options and find the one that best suits your needs.
6. **Consider Direct Deposit:** If you elect to have your refund directly deposited into your bank account, you'll receive it faster than waiting for a paper check.
7. **Visit the IRS website again and again:** The official IRS website is a great place to find everything you'll need to file your tax return: forms, publications, tips, answers to frequently asked questions and updates on tax law changes.
8. **Remember this number: 17...** check out IRS Publication 17, Your Federal Income Tax on the IRS website. It's a comprehensive collection of information for taxpayers highlighting everything you'll need to know when filing your return.

Your Fiscal Health (continued)

9. **Review! Review! Review!** Don't rush. We all make mistakes when we rush. Mistakes will slow down the processing of your return. Be sure to double-check all the Social Security Numbers and math calculations on your return as these are the most common errors made by taxpayers.
10. **Don't panic!** If you run into a problem, remember the IRS is there to help. Try <http://www.irs.gov> or call toll-free at 800-829-1040.

Links:

- [Forms and Publications](#)
- [E-filing](#)
- [1040 Central](#)

This information is excerpted from the official IRS website [www.IRS.gov](http://www.irs.gov)

Emerging Issues

Barbara Boyd, Chief
Policy and Accountability Branch

Future Federal Pay and Benefits

Additional legislation is being introduced in Congress that could change or affect federal pay and benefits for future years. On January 7, Rep. Kevin Brady (R-Texas) introduced the Cut Unsustainable and Top-heavy Spending (CUTS) Act that details a series of spending proposals targeting government operations and the federal workforce, while Rep. Mike Coffman (R-Colo.) on January 12, proposed a two-week furlough for federal civilian employees. On January 20 the 2011 Spending Reduction Act was unveiled by Rep. Jim Jordan (R-Ohio); Rep. Scott Garrett (R-N.J.); and Sen. Jim DeMint (R-S.C.).

The CUTS Act seeks to cut the federal workforce by 10 percent and implement a three-year pay freeze on federal civilian salaries, among other cuts, and Coffman's bill would require all civilian federal employees to take two weeks of nonconsecutive unpaid days of leave in fiscal year 2012. The Spending Reduction Act includes provisions to eliminate automatic pay increases for civilian employees for five years, cut the workforce by 15 percent through attrition and hire one new worker for every two who leave. The legislation also would collect unpaid taxes from federal workers, prohibit employees from conducting union business while on the job and cut the federal travel budget in half.

Keep in mind that these are not enacted bills; many bills are introduced that never even make it to the floor for a vote. Additional bills may yet be introduced that will have different provisions. We are mentioning these only because the "chatter" for legislative action that will affect compensation and benefits for federal employees has increased over the last several months and the potential for enactment, in some form, of legislation that further affects federal employees for outlying years is fairly high. We will be watching these efforts and if any of these bills start making headway in Congress and appear to be on the road to becoming law, we will provide further information on that in future editions.

Emerging Issues (continued)

Hispanic Council on Federal Government met in February

The first meeting of the Hispanic Council on Federal Employment was held at the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) on Feb. 11, according to a Jan. 26 notice in the *Federal Register*. The council's purpose is to advise the OPM director on the recruitment, hiring and advancement of Hispanics in the federal workforce. The council will consist of representatives from Hispanic organizations and senior government officials.

Open Season for Long Term Care Insurance

In a *Federal Register* announcement that has just been published, Open Season to apply for long term care insurance will run from April 4 through May 27, 2011.

During this open season, eligible individuals who are not currently enrolled in the Federal Long Term Care Insurance Program (FLTCIP) may apply for coverage, including current federal employees and retirees.

And, as part of the administration's drive to provide more benefits to same-sex domestic partners of federal employees, the long term care insurance program now allows same-sex domestic partners of civilian active workforce members to qualify as eligible relatives for using the insurance program.

Abbreviated or Standard Underwriting

One other item of note: Most relatives of federal employees will be subject to the *full underwriting standard* (i.e. more stringent) underwriting requirements for the program. Those that qualify for *abbreviated underwriting* are active workforce members, their spouses, and same-sex domestic partners of civilian active workforce members.

Abbreviated underwriting has fewer health-related questions than full underwriting. Employees who are eligible for abbreviated underwriting and apply for the 2, 3, or 5 year benefit period answer 7 questions about their health. Spouses of employees who are eligible for abbreviated underwriting answer 9 questions and need to authorize access to their medical records. They may also have an interview with a nurse.

Standard underwriting means that an applicant must answer more health-related questions. It may also include a review of medical records and possibly an interview with a nurse. This is the same level of underwriting that those who purchase individual policies in the private market typically undergo.

For those who may be wondering whether this less stringent underwriting standard may impact your long term care insurance rates, or wondering about higher rates for long term care insurance in general, you should review some of the history of premiums under this insurance program and the potential for significantly higher rates in the future.

Emerging Issues (continued)

One question that often arises from readers on extending benefits to same-sex partners of federal employees is whether the same benefits extend to opposite-sex partners of federal employees. In general, the answer is "no." The *Federal Register* announcement specifically identifies same-sex "partners" but also identifies only "spouses" for other federal employees. Moreover, the information site on long term care insurance specifically identifies spouses of federal employees or same-sex domestic partners of federal employees or annuitants who have filed out the [Declaration of Domestic Partnership](#) form.

Basis for Change in Qualifying Same-Sex Domestic Partners for Long Term Care Insurance

OPM's [Federal Register notice](#) cites a memorandum from President Barak Obama as the basis for extending this insurance benefit to same-sex partners. No change in law has been cited as a basis for the change. The OPM notice reads: The addition of same-sex domestic partners of civilian active workforce members as a new type of qualified relative eligible to apply for FLTCIP coverage is pursuant to [President's Memorandum](#) of June 17, 2009 on Federal Benefits and Non-Discrimination...."

The [President's Memorandum](#) of June 2010 states, in part: "Although legislative action is necessary to provide full equality to LGBT Federal employees, the agencies have identified a number of benefits that can be extended under existing law. OPM... has provided me with a report recommending that all of the identified benefits be extended."

More information on the long term care insurance program is at the Office of Personnel Management [website](#).

What's New at OPM

Visit OPM's [What's New](#) listing. It is provided as our one-stop source for finding out what new or updated content has been issued by OPM. The list orders the date any new content was issued, provides a brief description of the content, and links to documents/files that are referenced.

Career Opportunities in FFAS

All jobs (headquarters and field) open throughout each Agency may be obtained by accessing:

FSA Federal (GS) positions & FSA County Office (CO) positions:

<http://jobsearch.usajobs.opm.gov/a9agfsa.asp>

FAS Positions:

<http://jobsearch.usajobs.opm.gov/a9agfas.asp>

RMA Positions:

<http://jobsearch.usajobs.opm.gov/a9agrma.asp>

Provide feedback and articles for publication to the Editor at whilemenia.duncan@kcc.usda.gov