



OPEDA NEWSLETTER

Organization of Professional Employees
of the US Department of Agriculture

www.opeda.net

In This Issue	
President's Message	1
USDA Welcomes Secretary Vilsack	1
Unsung Hero 2009	1
Election of National President	2
Change in Number of Council Members	2
Telecommuting	2
USDA Training	2
Combined Federal Campaign	2
Holiday Party	2
Regional and National News	3

VOLUME I I - 1st EDITION	February 2009
--------------------------	---------------

President's Message

OPEDA activities during the next 6 months will mirror activities we have just completed country wide. We will elect a President and representatives to the National Council (Regional Council members).

During the past two months your Council members have voted to change the Bylaws of OPEDA so that the current Board of Directors working with the existing Council can improve the efficiency and the cost effectiveness of our organization. We now have the option of reducing the size of our Council to as few as five members and developing a stronger local infrastructure. Recent improvements in teleconferencing and electronic communication capabilities combined with our organizational changes should enhance OPEDA's capability to support individual members.

I encourage you to support the efforts of the Nominating Committee. Each member should consider whom he or she might like to have on the slate of nominees for President. Equally important is the selection of a new Council Member for your Region.

USDA Welcomes Secretary Tom Vilsack

Our new Secretary of Agriculture, Tom Vilsack, announced his priorities on January 26, 2009. These include the following:

- Implementing the 2008 Farm Bill quickly, modernizing the food safety system and supporting long-term agriculture development here and overseas
- Responding positively and conclusively to diversity issues
- Enhancing work on health and nutrition, including combating childhood obesity.
- Advancing research and development, including work on renewable energy sources to improve energy independence.

- Making progress on environmental challenges, including climate changes.
- Providing a safety net that works for all of agriculture, including independent producers and local and organic agriculture.
- Restoring the mission of the Forest Service as a protector of clean air, clean water and wildlife habitat; providing adequate resources for fighting wildfires and for other missions.
- Modernizing the computer systems of USDA.

The Secretary addressed to USDA employees in the Metro DC area on January 22, 2009. President Farook and Holly Hambley attended the meeting. A video of the presentation can be found on the USDA website by going to "About USDA - Home Page," followed by "About USDA," then "Secretary's Page" and finally on "Secretary Tom Vilsack Greets Employees."

On February 11, 2009, in the Q and A column of the Food Section of *The Washington Post*, staff writer Jane Black reported on her recent interview with Secretary Vilsack. Based on his personal experience, he emphasized the necessity for educating young moms and dads, the local school districts and states so that they all do a better job in providing nutritional options at school.

Unsung Hero Award Program

The time has arrived to nominate Unsung Heroes for recognition during the 2009 Public Service Recognition Week. The nomination forms are on the website, www.opeda.net, as is the announcement of the Award Ceremony and Luncheon on May 5, 2009. The deadline for filing the form in the OPEDA office is April 4, 2009. The forms can be sent by E-mail, regular mail to P.O. Box 381, Washington, DC 20044 or hand-delivered personally to Room SM-3, 3rd Wing, Sub-basement, South Building. Please note that mail delivered by the U.S. Postal Service to the USDA-OPEDA address in the South Building is subjected to security checks and

receipt may be delayed. Therefore, nominations sent by mail through the Postal Service should be addressed to the Post Office Box. 381.

Nominations should be made by a current USDA employee. Retired employees who are also current OPEDA members in good standing can also submit nominations.

The Unsung Hero Award Program was conceived by Lousanya Barnes-Keene in the 1990's. Lousanya suggested that we recognize USDA employees who have demonstrated high level service to the public, directly related to the employee's job duties. The awards have been given every year since they were first initiated.

OPEDA to Hold Triennial Election for National President

President Farook has appointed Fred Kaplan (Chair), Debbie Hamilton, Dr. Parveen Setia and Winona Scott to the 2009 nominating committee for National President. If you have a nominee, contact one of the members of the committee. The new President will take office on July 1, 2009 and the first term will expire on June 30, 2012.

The Nominating Committee will review potential nominees until April 3, 2009. Voting will occur between May 1 and June 15, 2009.

The OPEDA President is the only OPEDA official elected by the entire membership. He presides over the Board of Directors. The Council members elect their chair from among their members. The OPEDA Constitution and Bylaws state that the Council is the supreme governing body of our organization.

OPEDA Council Approves a Change in Number of Council Members.

In accordance with the Constitution and Bylaws of OPEDA, the Councilors (Regional Representatives) voted to permit a reduction in the number of Council members. The Board of Directors now has the responsibility to restructure the configuration of the Regions. This step was taken at the recommendation of the Council at the last meeting in May, 2008. The Board anticipates that there will be at least five Councilors in the new configuration, with Metropolitan DC being one of the new Regions.

The Council and Board hope to appoint at least one representative in each of the 55 states and territories. .

They are also considering the possibility of appointing representatives in locations where there are high concentrations of USDA employees.

This change should reduce the costs to OPEDA of attendance at the annual Council meeting. Electronic communication will make possible telecommuting for OPEDA as well as for USDA.

Telecommuting an Issue for USDA Employees

OPEDA continues to support an increase in telecommuting among USDA employees. The continuing financial burdens of our government suggest that this is a way we all support our Administration in its work to reduce the deficit and improve the financial situation in our country.

Employees Reveal Views on Training Needs in USDA

Discussions with OPEDA members and others both in the field and here in Washington, DC, suggest that many employees would welcome additional training not only for themselves but for those to whom they report. We certainly want our supervisors and managers to be technically competent, especially in USDA, but OPEDA would also like to encourage those who supervise to enrich their "people skills." This includes learning how to communicate with employees from diverse backgrounds. We do note also that even when backgrounds and skills are similar communication is not always totally successful.

OPEDA Takes Leadership Role in Supporting the Combined Federal Campaign

OPEDA took a leadership role in the International Bazaar supported by the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights (ASCR). In one OPEDA stall Farook presided over sales of jewelry and other items from India; the other stall purveyed woodworking objects from our Council President, Hal Swenson, and used books in good condition. OPEDA will present a substantial check to CFC during February

OPEDA Hosts Holiday Party

On December 16, 2009, the OPEDA National Office hosted a Christmas party in the patio of the Whitten Building; the celebration was attended by OPEDA members and USDA employees and invited guests in the Metro DC area. Farook presided over a short program and we all enjoyed performance of festive holiday carols by an invited choir.

Public Employees Round Table Moves to Partnership for Public Service

On February 9, 2009, the Board of Trustees for The Council for Excellence in Government (CEG) agreed to transfer most of its programs including the Public Employees Roundtable and including Public Service Recognition Week (PSRW) to the Partnership for Public Service (PPS)). Two CEG staff members, Jeanne van Vlandren and Amin Cyntje, will transfer to PPS. and will continue to work with Kirke Harper, Chairman of PER, on PSRW, as well as on other PER activities. This change will not impact the OPEDA Unsung Hero Award Program; this program is totally managed and administered by OPEDA in cooperation with USDA.

OPEDA Regional News

Region 10 E. Robert Purdom, Councilor, Region 10, has moved to Fort Worth, TX. He is the Resource Conservationist, Operations Management and Oversight Division. Congratulations, Robert.

Region 23 Kathleen Rajkowski is working on a new, bright brochure for OPEDA. Hats off to you, Kathleen!

Region 24 Councilor Willie Pittman, NRCS, has retired and is still living in the Greater Washington-Baltimore area. OPEDA looks forward to seeing more of Willie during 2009.

Federal Pay

Increases in pay for civilian federal workers are indexed to wage and salary increases in the private sector, as measured by the Employment Cost Index (ECI). The Federal Employees Pay Comparability Act of 1990 (P.L. 101-509, also referred to as FEPCA) states that pay for civilian federal employees is to be adjusted each year. If implemented fully, salaries of federal workers would be competitive with those of employees in the private sector. Under certain circumstances the President may limit the annual increase in federal pay by executive order; this has frequently occurred. Congress in some instances has overridden the presidential limitation. Average wages among all workers in the economy have risen by 643% since 1969; salaries for civilian federal employees have risen by 418% according to the Congressional Research Service.

The President's Pay Agent, comprised of the Secretary of Labor, the Director of the Office of Management and Budget, and the Director of the Office of Personnel Management, implements the locality pay program

implemented by the Federal Employees Pay Comparability Act (FEPCA). The President's Pay Agent is advised by the Federal Salary Council whose members include Colleen Kelley, President of the National Treasury Employees Union, NTEU)). Although in 2009 the Council's report to the Pay Agent recommended full implementation of locality pay as prescribed by FEPCA, the actual increase will be a fraction of the recommendation.

Sick Leave Bill Introduced for FERS Employees

"Representatives James Moran, D-VA, and Frank Wolf, R-VA, just reintroduced a bill that would allow employees under the Federal Employees Retirement System (FERS) to count unused sick leave as time toward their annuities. According to the *Federal Times* "The sponsors ... state that it will save the government \$68 million per year by cutting down on employees lost productivity. Because FERS employees currently lose all of their sick leave credit when they leave the government, Moran says many start to suffer from the so-called 'FERS flu' as they near retirement."

Director of the National Zoological Park, a Candidate for Director of OPM

John Berry, Director of the National Zoological Park, The Smithsonian Institution, was nominated by President Obama to be Director of the Office of Personnel Management as reported January 13, 2009, in *The Washington Post*. Colleen Kelley, President, National Treasury Employees Union hailed the nomination. Barry, during his time as aide to Steny Hoyer, Congressman, 5th District, MD, and Kelley worked together during the creation of the 1990 Federal Employees Pay Comparability Act.

Diversity and Inclusion Forum

The goal of The Diversity and Inclusion (D & I) Forum is the development of a comparison of the state of D and I at a benchmark point (probably October 2008) to the state of D and I a year hence. The Forum will consider the effects of outside forces such as the downturn in the economy as well as inside forces in its evaluation.

OPEDA Requests Your Input

OPEDA would enjoy learning of your needs. We welcome suggestions from members and news items.

New OPEDA Members

We welcome Lolita Ellis, FOIA Officer, OSEC/ASCA and Maria Wells, ASCR to membership in OPEDA.

Thank you for reading the OPEDA Newsletter. Your comments and contributions are welcome. Please write to us at OPEDA, P.O. Box 381, Washington, DC 20044 or send an E-mail to opeda@da.usda.gov

Organization of Professional Employees of the US
Department of Agriculture, P. O. Box 381, Washington,
D.C. 20044. Phone (202) 720-4898. Fax (202) 720-6692.
<http://www.opeda.net>

