



Agriculture and
Agri-Food Canada

Agriculture et
Agroalimentaire Canada



Audit of Promotion and Succession Planning of Research Scientists

AAFC Office of Audit and Evaluation

The AAFC Audit Committee recommended this audit report for approval by the Deputy Minister on April 26, 2016.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Science and Technology Branch's (STB) workforce includes employees from the Science and Professional occupational categories. This includes approximately 385 employees occupying positions in the Scientific Research group – Research Scientists sub-group (SE-RES).

The promotion of SE-RES Research Scientists at Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada (AAFC) is an incumbent-based process, aligning with the Career Progression Management Framework for Federal Researchers. The Framework was adopted by AAFC in 2006.

In terms of succession planning, over 40% of the employees in the Scientific Research group – Research Scientists sub-group are eligible to retire in the next 3 years¹.

The audit of Succession Planning and Promotion of Research Scientists was included in the 2015-2018 Risk-Based Audit Plan. The audit focused on whether effective management frameworks are in place for promotion and succession of research scientists at AAFC.

The audit determined that there were opportunities for improvement in the management framework in place for promotion of research scientists and weaknesses in the management framework in place for succession planning of research scientists at AAFC.

The audit recommendations, addressed to the Assistant Deputy Minister (ADM), STB, are as follows:

- Develop, approve and make available Terms of Reference for all the committees overseeing the promotional processes for research scientists;
- Ensure there is sufficient and a consistent level of feedback provided to applicants and their Research, Development and Technology management team and;
- Review and strengthen the management control framework for succession planning of research scientists.

¹ As per STB's 2015-16 Branch Plan

1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND

- 1.1.1 STB is the largest Branch in AAFC with 1,986 employees (as of December 31, 2015), which represents over 40% of the Department's workforce². STB's workforce includes employees from the Science and Professional occupational categories. There are approximately 385 employees occupying positions in the SE-RES sub-group.
- 1.1.2 AAFC is one of the largest employers of SE-RES research scientists within the federal government. Natural Resources Canada is another large employer of research scientists within the federal government.
- 1.1.3 The promotion of SE-RES research scientists within STB is an incumbent-based process based on the Career Progression Management Framework for Federal Researchers (herein referred to as the Framework). The Framework provides a common and consistent understanding and application of the SE-RES classification standard in science-based departments and agencies, while retaining a focus on excellence in research³. The Framework was approved in 2006 by AAFC, as well as by the following federal organizations: Communications Research Centre of Canada (part of Industry Canada⁴), Environment Canada⁵, Fisheries and Oceans Canada, Health Canada, Public Health Agency of Canada and Natural Resources Canada.
- 1.1.4 Currently, the Science and Technology Integration Board⁶ is developing new ways to manage the planning of activities across departments and agencies as well as strengthening the resources and practices needed to support integrated federal science and technology. These include development of: a skilled and talented federal science and technology

² As per STB's 2015-16 Branch Plan

³ For more details, refer to the "Career Progression Management Framework for Federal Researchers-Application for the SE-RES Community" <http://intranet.agr.gc.ca/agrisource/eng/human-resources/staffing/research-scientist-career-progression?id=1331326842233>

⁴ Industry Canada was renamed to Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada in November 2015.

⁵ Environment Canada was renamed to Environment and Climate Change Canada in November 2015.

⁶ The Integration Board is an interdepartmental Assistant Deputy Minister level Committee. For more information on the Science and Technology Integration Board refer to the following link: <http://www.science.gc.ca/default.asp?lang=En&xml=F7A65D26-FEF4-485B-BBFF-5FC7BA031A95>

workforce; a modern and functional science infrastructure; strong partnerships and linkages; and innovative policies and practices.

- 1.1.5 In terms of succession planning, STB's 2015-16 Branch Plan stated that there is a need to "address the issue of workforce renewal in the near future as its population continues to age and the number of people taking their retirement may increase". It also stated that: "The probable retirement of a large number of highly qualified and experienced employees highlights the need for careful management of knowledge and capacity planning for the Branch."
- 1.1.6 As per STB's 2015-16 Branch Plan, over 40% of the employees in the SE-RES occupational sub-category are eligible to retire in the next three years. The branch based its Human Resources plan on the potential that approximately 5% of AAFC's research scientists will elect to retire in the next three years.

1.2 AUDIT OBJECTIVE

- 1.2.1 The objective of this audit was to determine whether effective management frameworks are in place for promotion and succession planning of research scientists at AAFC.

1.3 AUDIT SCOPE

- 1.3.1 In terms of promotion, the audit focused on the SE-RES occupational sub-group, given the unique promotion process for research scientists in this sub-group. This incumbent-based process relies on a research scientist's accomplishments, and not on changes to the duties in the work description. The succession planning portion of this engagement likewise focused on the SE-RES occupational sub-group.
- 1.3.2 The audit reviewed promotion and succession planning processes that were in place for the 2012-13 and 2013-14 fiscal years.
- 1.3.3 Information from Corporate Management Branch (CMB), Human Resources Directorate was also gathered in support of the Audit of Succession Planning and Promotion of Research Scientists.

1.4 AUDIT APPROACH

1.4.1 The audit approach and methodology was risk-based and consistent with the *International Standards for the Professional Practice of Internal Auditing* and the *Internal Auditing Standards for the Government of Canada*, as required under the *Treasury Board Policy on Internal Audit*.

1.4.2 Internal Audit performed the following audit steps:

- Planning Phase: Internal Audit conducted a risk assessment to determine the audit's objective and scope. Based on the risk assessment, the audit criteria and audit program were developed for use in the audit's conduct phase. The audit criteria are presented in Annex A of this report.
- Document Review: Internal Audit assessed key documentation to obtain an understanding of the research scientist promotional and succession planning processes, including those used by STB management and research scientists.
- File Review: Internal Audit selected and reviewed a sample of 20 promotional applications related to the 2012-13 and 2013-14 fiscal years.
- Interviews: Internal Audit conducted interviews with members of STB management and staff, and with CMB – Human Resources staff, who support the Framework.

1.4.3 The conduct phase of the audit took place from April to November 2015.

1.5 CONCLUSION

1.5.1 The audit determined that there were opportunities for improvement in the management framework in place for promotion of research scientists and weaknesses in the management framework in place for succession planning of research scientists at AAFC.

1.5.2 Recommendations are made in the following areas:

- Promotion process - Terms of Reference for promotion committees;
- Promotion process - communication of results/feedback; and
- Succession planning - framework for research scientists.

1.6 STATEMENT OF CONFORMANCE

- 1.6.1 In the professional opinion of the Chief Audit Executive, sufficient and appropriate audit procedures have been conducted and evidence gathered to support the accuracy of the conclusion provided and contained in this report. The conclusion is based on a comparison of the conditions, as they existed at the time, against pre-established audit criteria that were agreed on with management. The conclusion is applicable only to the entity examined.
- 1.6.2 This audit conforms with the *Internal Auditing Standards for the Government of Canada*, as supported by the results of the quality assurance and improvement program.

2.0 DETAILED OBSERVATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND MANAGEMENT RESPONSES

2.0.1 This section presents the key observations, based on the evidence and analysis associated with the audit, and provides recommendations for improvement.

2.0.2 Management responses are included and provide:

- An action plan to address each recommendation
- A lead responsible for implementing the action plan, and,
- A target date for completing the action plan.

2.1 PROMOTION PROCESSES FOR RESEARCH SCIENTISTS

2.1.1 Application Process

2.1.1.1 There is an annual application process for the promotion of research scientists which commences in October and is completed by April of the following year.

2.1.1.2 At the initiation of the promotion process a “call” letter is sent out to all research scientists, which provides links to the Federal Career Progression Management Framework, AAFC application form and guidelines, the Balanced Evaluation Guide and Career Progression Rating Reports, and a “Preparing Your Promotion” PowerPoint deck. The audit reviewed STB’s SharePoint site and confirmed that the letter and documents are posted on the site. In addition, there was a listing of committee chairs and a general inquiries email address. The “call” letter encouraged applicants to seek advice, comments, and feedback from colleagues and their Research, Development and Technology Director.

2.1.1.3 The audit interviewed a sample of 24 research scientists, representing 24% of the 98⁷ who applied for a promotion in 2012-13 and 2013-14. Half of the sample were successful and the other half non-successful. The interviews confirmed that AAFC research scientists received an annual “call” letter from the ADM, STB inviting them to prepare and submit an application for promotion. Feedback from interviewees

⁷ With no double counting of applicants who applied in both of the two fiscal years.

found that the “call” letter and SharePoint site information was helpful to applicants.

- 2.1.1.4 Interviews also confirmed that Career progression information sessions were held in several research centres to help inform scientists of the promotion process.
- 2.1.1.5 The audit reviewed the Departmental Career Progression Review Committee meeting minutes for 2013-14 and 2014-15 and found that the committee held post mortems on how to improve the promotion process from year to year.
- 2.1.1.6 Interviews with research scientists also showed that a majority of them: 22 of 24 (92%), used informal means to have colleagues provide comments and feedback on their application, prior to submission.

2.1.2 Assessment of Applications

- 2.1.2.1 STB manages the application process of the Career Progression Management Framework for Federal Researches through five committees:
 - Four RES-level career progression committees (RES 01-02, RES 02-03, RES 03-04 and RES 04-05) responsible for evaluating and recommending or denying applications for promotion and consideration to the departmental committee;
 - The Departmental Career Progression Review Committee (DCPRC) is the highest level committee, which determines final approval or denial. The Chair of the DCPRC issues a Letter of Decision to each applicant.
- 2.1.2.2 The audit reviewed a sample of 20 detailed application assessments and rating reports prepared by the review committees during 2012-13 and 2013-14 and confirmed that assessments were performed in a consistent manner among all committees. The audit also confirmed that the committees assessed and scored applications using rating reports that aligned with the Framework’s balanced assessment on Valued Outcomes (Innovation, Productivity, Impact and Recognition). Valued Outcomes were assessed on the three contexts of work: Research, Development and Analysis, Managing of Research and Representation of Client Services.
- 2.1.2.3 During the audit conduct, a Terms of Reference was finalized for the Departmental Career Progression Review Committee (DCPRC) which

included its mandate and defined roles and responsibilities. Although the audit team received some other guidance documents on governance bodies that pre-date the DCPRC, no other current guidance materials were identified.

2.1.2.4 Based on a review of the STB SharePoint and intranet sites and interviews with three of five (60%) of the committee chairs, the audit determined there were no Terms of References for any of the four RES-level career progression committees. The audit also noted that there were no Terms of Reference posted on the STB SharePoint site, nor on the STB intranet site. In addition, promotion committee members were not listed on these sites. In the absence of documented and published Terms of Reference, it may be unclear to some members of the research scientist community as to the composition of the committee, how members are selected, members' roles and responsibilities and how decisions are made.

2.1.2.5 **Recommendation 1:** The ADM, Science and Technology Branch should ensure that Terms of References are developed, approved for all the committees overseeing the promotional processes for research scientists and made available on the STB site, including such aspects as:

- How committee member selection is designed to cover different applicants' areas of research; and
- How Conflict of Interest situations are managed.

Management Response and Action Plan: Agreed.

STB is in the process of developing Terms of Reference for all Career Progression Committees and updating the Terms of Reference for the Departmental Committee. These will address among other issues the selection of committee members, including consideration of area of scientific specialization, and conflicts of interest, and will be posted on the SharePoint site advertised and accessible to all Branch staff.

Target Date for Completion: August 31, 2016

Lead(s) Responsible: ADM, Science and Technology Branch

2.1.3 Communication of Results

- 2.1.3.1 Based on research scientist interviews and a review of supporting promotion file documentation, the audit determined that all applicants were provided with a Decision Letter from the DCPRC Chair and a Career Progression Rating Report.
- 2.1.3.2 Thirteen of 24 (54%) research scientists interviewed indicated that the feedback provided within the Decision Letter and Career Progression Rating Report did not provide adequate information on how certain assessment criteria were not met and how to improve their application for a subsequent year. The audit reviewed a sampling of 12 Decision Letters and Career Progression Rating Reports provided to unsuccessful RES applicants and found that explanations on decisions were insufficient for assessment criteria in eight of 12 cases (67%).
- 2.1.3.3 Decision Letters encouraged the unsuccessful applicants to discuss results with Chairs for further explanation. The research scientists interviewed indicated that five of the 12 (42%) unsuccessful applicants contacted the Chair to obtain further explanations, and all five research scientists commented that the feedback provided was not beneficial in understanding how to improve their application for potential resubmission in a subsequent year.
- 2.1.3.4 In addition, the audit observed that the career promotion committees did not provide a consistent level of feedback for similar cases. Based on supporting documents and interviews, the audit noted that one committee chair provided unsuccessful applicants with access to their “in-depth” committee reports upon request; while the remaining two of three (66%) committee chairs that were interviewed did not provide access to “in-depth” committee reports, unless a recourse action was undertaken. Insufficient and inconsistent feedback provided to unsuccessful applicants may increase the potential risk that applicants may continue to be unsuccessful in their re-application for promotion during a subsequent year and/or in a perceived lack of fairness in the process.
- 2.1.3.5 **Recommendation 2:** The ADM, Science and Technology Branch should ensure there is sufficient and consistent feedback provided to applicants and their Research, Development and Technology Director management team.

Management Response and Action Plan: Agreed.

STB will improve the quality and timeliness of this feedback, including providing all applicants with the option of a meeting with the Chair of the relevant Career Progression Committee to discuss their application. Lessons learned from these applications will also be used to improve the Frequently Asked Questions SharePoint site. Applicants will also be given the opportunity each year to provide feedback on the process as a whole including the quality and timeliness of comments on their application through a survey to be conducted each year within two months of the conclusion of the annual exercise; this feedback will be made available to the Committee Chairs for continuous improvement.

Target Date for Completion: August 31, 2016

Lead(s) Responsible: ADM, Science and Technology Branch

2.1.4 Recourse Mechanism

- 2.1.4.1 The audit confirmed that AAFC also has an Independent Recourse Mechanism in place for SE-RES applicants and the process aligns with the Independent Recourse Mechanism (IRM) as part of the Career Progression Framework. The IRM is overseen by the Corporate Management Branch – Human Resources Directorate.
- 2.1.4.2 The audit determined that five SE-RES applied for recourse during 2012-13 and 2013-14. In four cases, independent reviewers were assigned and confirmed as being all external to AAFC with the exception of one due to language and qualification requirements. In the latter case, an AAFC in-depth reviewer was assigned and verified as independent to the applicant.
- 2.1.4.3 The audit confirmed that in all cases, the Independent Reviewer provided results of their assessments to the Deputy Minister who, based on recommendations from the Assistant Deputy Minister, Corporate Management Branch, provided applicants with a final decision.
- 2.1.4.4 The audit also verified that AAFC performed the independent recourse process steps in a timely manner, and as defined in the IRM.

2.2 SUCCESSION PLANNING FOR RESEARCH SCIENTISTS

- 2.2.1 The audit team examined current succession planning processes in relation to Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat's guidance and good business practices. This included such elements as: identification of key positions, definition of capabilities required, recruitment options, monitoring activities, governance mechanism and roles and responsibilities.
- 2.2.2 The audit found that STB had some processes and documentation in place for succession planning, which included: sector strategies, centre profiles, staffing plans, and the Postdoctoral Research Pilot Program. The audit noted that the branch performs demographic analytics to determine trends, for example: to identify areas where retirement is most prevalent. This analysis is provided to STB senior management to support the development of the annual staffing plan.
- 2.2.3 The audit highlighted the need to have a strategic perspective and mechanisms in place for SE-RES positions at the national, sectoral, and centre levels; and to identify key areas for succession early, in order to ensure continuity of research and knowledge transfer.
- 2.2.4 AAFC is working with the Deans of the Agriculture Universities and Colleges on succession planning and prioritizing and aligning capacity for new positions to meet future research needs. In addition, AAFC is working with the sector to determine the public-private research staffing requirements.
- 2.2.5 The audit observed a limited number of reference documents and tools for succession planning within SharePoint to support STB's senior management.
- 2.2.6 The audit also noted that succession planning was not listed within the Terms of Reference for STB's Branch Executive Committee and the Branch Implementation and Human Resources Committee. By including this, it would reinforce the importance of succession planning at the committee level, and enable a periodic discussion on succession planning by the Committee.
- 2.2.7 **Recommendation 3:** The ADM, Science and Technology Branch should review and strengthen the management control framework for succession planning of research scientists, including:
- Identify key positions for succession planning;
 - Enhance Research, Development and Technology management guidance documents and/or tools for succession planning; and

- Revise the Terms of References for key Branch committees to include succession planning as an area of responsibility.

Management Response and Action Plan: Agreed.

As identified as a need by our HR tiger team, STB is developing a talent management process specifically focused on the SE-RES community. Other classifications will also be addressed.

In order to identify these key positions, STB will perform demographic and scientific specialization analyses of key positions.

This analysis will be presented and discussed at the Branch Implementation and Human Resources Committee and the Branch Executive Committee at least annually. A document will be developed and presented to the Branch Implementation and Human Resources Committee providing guidance on scientist succession planning.

The Terms of Reference of the Branch Implementation and Human Resources Committee will be revised to explicitly include scientist succession planning.

Target Date for Completion: September 30, 2016

Lead(s) Responsible: ADM, Science and Technology Branch

ANNEX A: AUDIT CRITERIA

A) Promotion of Research Scientists:

- 1) To determine whether the Career Progression Process for research scientists is in place and followed as per the Career Progression Management Framework for Federal Researchers.
- 2) To determine whether there are effective oversight processes in place for the career progression of research scientists.
- 3) To determine whether branch guidance, information and tools are available and communicated to support career progression for research scientists.

B) Succession Planning for Research Scientists:

- 1) To determine whether succession planning processes for research scientists are in place and followed as per Treasury Board guidelines.
- 2) To determine whether there are effective oversight processes in place for the succession planning of research scientists.
- 3) To determine whether branch guidance, information and tools are available and communicated to support succession planning for research scientists.

ANNEX B: ACRONYMS

AAFC	Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada
ADM	Assistant Deputy Minister
CMB	Corporate Management Branch
DCPRC	Departmental Career Progression Review Committee
IRM	Independent Recourse Mechanism
SE-RES	Scientific Research group – Research Scientists sub-group
STB	Science and Technology Branch