



May 10, 2023

INFORMATIONAL MEMORANDUM

TO: State Conservationists
Deputy Chiefs

FROM: Angela Biggs, Deputy Chief for Management and Strategy **BECKY ROSS** Digitally signed by BECKY ROSS
Date: 2023.05.10 15:34:36 -0400

SUBJECT: Pilot for Recruitment Incentives for New FY23-FY25 Pathways Interns

ACTION: **Action Required by Close of Business (COB) on the First Day of Interns Reporting to Work!**

Purpose: This memo announces that NRCS will pilot the use of incentives for newly hired Pathways interns at NRCS. **It also identifies necessary actions to be completed by COB of the first day our interns report to work. Please see the detailed instructions provided by the Human Resources Division, addressed toward the end of this message.**

Background: NRCS is experiencing exponential growth in financial and technical assistance with the passage of the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) and the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) of 2022, in addition to our continued responsibilities related to the Farm Bill. NRCS has an urgent need of literally thousands of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) positions, across multiple years, in a very competitive marketplace. An important component of this urgency includes filling pathways positions, as these positions represent pipeline positions for many of our Mission Critical Occupations (MCO's). Additionally, the attrition of key positions leads to concerns in meeting Farm Bill, BIL and IRA responsibilities.

Anticipated benefits for piloting the use of incentives for Pathways Interns include the following:

- Increasing capacity to address increasing workload due to IRA and other initiatives,
- Providing opportunities to effectively address discontinuance of stipends for Pathways Interns,
- Reducing extremely high declination rates for Pathways,
- Increasing conversion rates of Pathways Interns,
- Increasing diversity in our workforce,
- Increasing effectiveness of Pathways to serve as a critical component to succession planning, and
- Increasing NRCS's competitiveness in the STEM marketplace.

Pilot: In an effort to improve recruitment and retention of Pathways participants, which serves as a key component of our succession planning strategy, NRCS will pilot the use of recruitment incentives for all newly hired FY23-FY25 Pathways Intern positions.

Three consecutive years of selections will provide a six-year evaluation period (FY23-FY28) during which all service agreements should become fully executed. This approach, and the data gained from it, will inform our evaluation of the impacts and effectiveness of using incentives for Pathways Interns. Key indicators we will address include historical data for declinations, positions filled and unfilled, and conversion rates without incentives, in comparison to those when incentives are used.

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Under this pilot, newly hired interns will receive an annual incentive that will be a minimum of \$3,000 (with adjustments for high cost of living areas) near the beginning of each work period, followed by an incentive payment at time of conversion. For the most equitable approach to determining incentive amounts, NRCS will use a variable model based on GSA's Per Diem Rates for Temporary Housing, which will inform incentive amounts based on actual duty locations. A multi-year service agreement will be executed between each student and the agency. Incentive amounts for future years will be determined each year, based on duty location.

The Human Resources Division (HRD) at the FPAC Business Center is assisting in the implementation of our pilot and have provided the following:

Current Recruitment Incentive Approval Process for Pathway Interns (Note this is mainly internal steps within HRD, as one national request was submitted from the Agency):

- HRD received a Recruitment Incentive request for a large amount of NRCS Pathways Interns from NRCS-HQ.
- HRD – Policy will first review and complete approvals for each qualifying Intern from the Request. This will include Approval Signature on AD-1073 form prior to EOD.
- For Each Intern Recruitment Incentive, HRD Policy will create a specific Intern Folder including pertinent documents and load that for HRD Staffing Section to pick up.
- HRD Staffing Section will review the approved packet for each intern and draft up a service agreement utilizing the information from request.
- HRD Staffing Section will send a cover letter and service agreement to each approved Pathway intern.
 - **The cover letter identifies that the Intern & Supervisor must sign the service agreement and return to the HR Specialist no later than COB the first day the intern reports to work.**
- **Intern & Supervisor must do 1 of 2 things by COB the first day Intern reports to work:**
 - Either, review, sign the service agreement, and return signed service agreement to Human Resource Specialist by COB on the first day the Intern reports to work.
 - OR, if the Intern is declining the service agreement, review and sign a declination decision memorandum, and return that to the Human Resource Specialist by COB on the first day the Intern reports to work.
- **Intern & Supervisor need to also ensure 1st day of reporting instructions are completed including attendance of the New Employee Orientation.**
- Once the Staffing Human Resource Specialist receives the signed service agreement, Staffing will upload that to the case file for the Intern's recruitment incentive and move that file to the Compensation Teams folder.
- Compensation Team will pick up the new folders submitted to them, verify first day reporting, and enter installment payment 1 into the system.
- Estimated processing posted date would be 3 weeks from first day of reporting to work.

Using Incentives for Pathways Interns is a new step for NRCS. We are confident this pilot will result in numerous benefits and advantages to us as an employer. We also know we will learn much along the way. In that spirit, we have established a Frequently Asked Questions Page, which we will be adding to over time, that can be found here: [PathwaysIncentivesFAQ's](#).

We look forward to implementing this pilot over the next few years. We will be observing the effects this expansion of our use of current hiring flexibilities to be more competitive in the STEM marketplace, to meet the increased demands of the Inflation Reduction Act, to continue to build and sustain a high

performing, diverse workforce, while providing our interns a better opportunity to earn a living wage. The use of recruitment incentives for pathways interns is another step in continuing to make NRCS the employer of choice.

If you have questions about the IRA Pilot for Pathways Incentives, please reach out to Bruce Hawkins, Management and Program Analyst at bruce.hawkins@usda.gov or Thomas Morgart, Acting Director, Strategic Support Services Division, at thomas.morgart@usda.gov.

cc: Associate Chief
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