

My Perspectives on Working at ARS

My name is Sabine Goldberg and I was a Research Soil Scientist with the Agricultural Research Service (ARS) of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). I have held this position at the U.S. Salinity Laboratory in Riverside, California for 33 years and retired in May 2016. In this article, I will provide a brief description of what it is like to work for ARS. I will also try to explain some of the intricacies of the employment application process. The URL for the ARS website is: <http://www.ars.usda.gov>. The Careers pull-down menu leads to: 1) ARS Vacancies at USAJOBS; 2) Careers and ARS Info; 3) ARS Post Doctoral Positions. You will want to explore each of these in detail. The National Programs item under the Research pull-down menu provides a listing of all of the current ARS research program areas. A map showing the location of all ARS research stations located throughout the United States can be found under the People & Locations pull-down menu.

Work at ARS:

Not surprisingly, US citizenship is required for federal employment. Agricultural Research Service scientists work on agricultural problems of broad national interest. All jobs are defined by a job description. For scientists this constitutes investigation of a broad research area within one of the priority research areas (listed under National Programs). Agency research is client and customer driven. Scientific positions are full-time research positions. Therefore, scientists do not have the distractions of teaching and committee meetings. Scientists are provided with base funding for: salary, technician salary, travel, supplies, and equipment. Although it is strongly encouraged, it is therefore not necessary to pursue outside grant funding support. This frees up more time for research. In contrast to universities, ARS does not have a tenure process. The emphasis is on quality, not quantity, of research publications. The advantage of this philosophy is that scientists are able and encouraged to investigate research problems in great detail. Additionally, because base funding is provided, scientists do not have to chase "flavor of the month" research topics. Promotion is based on scientific productivity and evidence of national and international impact.

Employment Application Process:

The first page of the attached file provides some general information including a listing of the ARS positions that are open at the this time. The advertisements for these positions can be found at the ARS Vacancies at USAJOBS item on the Careers pull-down menu on the ARS webpage. The attached file also includes job announcements for a Biological Science Laboratory Technician and a Research Molecular Biologist Postdoctoral Research Associate. These examples are for reference only. I have deleted some less critical sections in the interest of brevity.

Your application will be evaluated, and if you are deemed qualified, will be placed into three categories: Best Qualified, Well-Qualified, or Qualified. Your goal is to have your application placed into the Best Qualified category because, in the current competitive job market, this is usually the only category from which a selection will be made. The most important part of your application is to describe in detail how you meet the qualifications and competencies. In other words, do you have the knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) to do the job? When explaining this you must use the exact terms listed in the Qualifications Required section. This is critically

important because applications are evaluated by personnel specialists who have no scientific background. If you do not use the identical scientific terms, a personnel specialist will conclude that you are not qualified for the position. The recruiting scientist will only see the resumes of the applicants deemed qualified by the personnel specialist.

Job announcements on the ARS website are updated continuously and many jobs are open only for a very short time. When you see a job advertised that appeals to you, apply immediately. Ironically, after your application is submitted, you may likely not hear anything for a very long time and will probably think that the position has been filled. Again, ironically, after a selection is made, you may be expected to report to the position almost immediately.