

Fish & Wildlife Service  
Mountain-Prairie Region

# Student Career Experience Program (SCEP)



## Student Handbook

Welcome to Fish and Wildlife Service! "The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's mission is, working with others, to conserve, protect and enhance fish, wildlife, and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people." The Fish and Wildlife Service is committed to employee excellence and creating a productive work environment. Our commitment to human resources includes initiatives to attract and retain top-quality personnel as well as develop our employees and future managers.

The Student Career Experience Program (SCEP) with the Fish and Wildlife Service offers you the opportunity to blend your academic studies and Federal work experience into a progressive educational program. It gives you the opportunity to test your career interest in jobs generally related to the field of study you are pursuing. And, you are paid for the experience you gain on the job.

We have put together a set of questions and answers that hopefully will inform you of all you need to know about the Student Career Experience Program (SCEP) and working for the Fish and Wildlife Service. If you have any other questions or if we can help you in any way, please let us know. We want to help you be the best you can be—at the Fish and Wildlife Service, we believe that.... Employees are our most important asset!

## **Questions and Answers**

### **What kind of work will I be doing?**

The work you will be doing will be related to your field of study such as computer science, engineering, fish and wildlife biology, outdoor recreation management, etc. The level of work you perform and the amount of responsibilities you have will depend upon how far advanced you are in your formal classroom studies. For example, if you are in your second year of college you might be a computer aid or an engineering aid and as you progress through school you would begin to perform the work of a technician in the related discipline. You will receive a copy of your position description and your immediate supervisor will go over it with you explaining any questions you might have about what is expected of you in your position. Do not hesitate to ask questions at any time about what you are to be doing. Always remember this is a learning experience.

### **What hours will I be working?**

Your hours of work will be discussed with you by your supervisor. Normally, employees can begin work between the hours of 6 to 9 a.m. and can establish a lunch period of from 30 to 60 minutes. There are some offices that have established flexible work schedules such as working nine days a pay period and getting a three day weekend every other week. Since SCEP students are usually assigned to work with one or more employees, you may be required to work the same hours they work. Be sure that you have a clear understanding of your work hours the first day you report for work. Also find out what the office policy is regarding whom you must call and by what time if you are sick or have an emergency and cannot get to work.

### **Where will my job be located?**

Positions throughout Fish and Wildlife Service are in a variety of locations: metropolitan are, smaller towns, and perhaps in remote and/or isolated areas. Make sure you find out what the location is like. For example, if you do not have a car, you probably would not want to work in an isolated area. Ask yourself what is important to you and find out if it will be available such as sporting events, public transportation, movie theaters, etc.

### **What are the working conditions in the office?**

The working conditions in the office will vary depending on where you work. For example, you can work at a refuge, or field station which may require you to wear a uniform or protective clothing. Employees who work in the Regional Office tend to dress more casually. The best advice is to ask.

Most of the offices are smoke free; however, there are designated smoking areas. In some, eating facilities are immediately available either in the same building or within walking distances. There are also offices (duty stations) where you may have to take your lunch. In those instances, a refrigerator and microwave are usually available.

The first day at work you should ask about office policies concerning use of government telephones, breaks, etc.

### **What are the housing/living conditions like?**

The living conditions will tie in with where your job is located. In some of the remote/isolated areas, government housing may be available. If it is, find out if it's furnished. In smaller towns there may not be many apartments available to rent. In the absence of available apartments, would you be willing to commute to work or perhaps live in a private home?

Remember, living in a private home requires some living skills you may not have experienced before. Usually in the more metropolitan areas you will be able to find rentals readily available. You may also have to be prepared to stay in a motel for a few days until you find housing. It is a good idea to find out what weather conditions you can expect. This way you can avoid bringing clothes you will not need or find yourself shopping for a heavy jacket or coat.

### **When will I get my first pay check?**

Federal employees get paid on a biweekly basis. These are referred to as a pay period and there are 26 a year. You will receive your pay check approximately 12 days after the pay period ends. For example, if you began working on January 12, 2000 (the beginning of a pay period), you would receive your first pay check on January 27, 2000.

There are provisions for an advance of pay if conditions warrant. The advance pay would then be deducted from a future pay check. If you need an advance of pay, you should request it at least 30 days before you report for work.

You will also be requested to have your check deposited to a financial institution. This means you should have established an account at a bank, credit union, or some other financial institution before your first paycheck arrives.

### **Do I get paid for holidays?**

You will get paid for holidays if you are scheduled to work and have been in a pay status either the day prior to the holiday or the day after the holiday. If you are working a part-time schedule, you will get paid only for the hours you would be scheduled to work on the holiday.

### **Am I entitled to vacation time and do I get paid if I am sick and have to stay home?**

SCEP students earn both sick and vacation (annual) leave. If you are working full-time, you earn 4 hours of both annual and sick leave every pay period. If you are working part-time, you earn 1 hour each of annual and sick leave for every 20 hours you work. You can accumulate up to 240 hours (6 weeks) of annual leave and carry it over from one year to the next. There is no limit on the amount of sick leave you can accumulate. Annual leave can be requested from your supervisor whenever you need to be away from work for personnel reasons. Sick leave is used for illness and personnel medical related absences, such as dentist appointments. Check with your supervisor regarding when you will need to provide a doctor's certificate for approval of sick leave.

### **What exactly does leave without pay mean?**

Leave without pay, commonly referred to as LWOP, means you are still an employee of the Federal Government, but that you are in a non-pay status at the time.

### **What are alternate and parallel work experiences?**

A parallel work experience is arranging to work part-time, usually about 20 hours per week, while you are attending classes. This is feasible only when the work site is within a short commute of school.

The alternate method refers to working or attending school full-time.

Early in your student work experience, review your work/study schedule with your SCEP coordinator at work. It is important to be sure you will have sufficient work hours in the appropriate sequence.

### **Who pays my expenses if I have to travel while I am working for you?**

If you are required to travel in the performance of your duties, your transportation will be arranged for you. You will be reimbursed for your motel room and meals within the guidelines set for the location you are traveling to. In most instances when travel is required, you should know far enough in advance so you can request cash to cover your expenses (travel advance) if you need it. It would be a good idea to make sure you understand what receipts you need to keep, how to complete a travel voucher, and what expenses are allowable before you travel. Ask your supervisor any questions you might have on travel policies.

### **Can I receive awards for the work I do?**

Yes, as a Federal employee you are eligible to receive awards for performance, superior accomplishment, honorary, and other monetary and external awards based upon your contributions and the benefits to the Federal Government.

### **What is the difference between the standards of performance and conduct?**

Standards of performance are established so you can determine what tasks you must perform and at what level in order to perform your position in a fully satisfactory manner. You should receive your standards of performance within the first 30 days of your initial appointment. Your supervisor will discuss them with you. If you do not fully understand them, or if you have questions about your standards later on, ask your supervisor to clarify their meaning.

Your performance rating will be used to determine how well you are doing in SCEP. It will be used to identify your strengths and weaknesses as a basis for recommending elective courses, determining if your performance in your current position warrants a promotion, or deciding whether or not you should remain in SCEP.

Standards of conduct address how you conduct yourself both on the job and outside of work. When you report for your initial work experience you will receive a copy of the Department of Interior, Employee Responsibilities and Conduct, it would be a good idea to read it. Some of the items covered are working outside of the government, receiving gifts, political activity, work ethics, etc.

### **What do I need to learn about my job?**

You and your supervisor will prepare an Individual Development Plan (IDP) soon after you report to work. This plan will outline the knowledge and skills you need to gain or strengthen and will include how the knowledge and skills will be developed during your work and study periods. The plan can include training strategies other than the courses you plan to take in college, such as readings, videotapes, rotation assignment, as well as on the job training. Your supervisor will evaluate your progress periodically and change/update your IDP as needed.

### **If I do not like my job, can I transfer to another Government office?**

If you do not like your job, the first thing you should do is discuss it with your supervisor. Some thoughts of what might be happening; are my job duties related to my field of study; are my job duties above or below what I have learned in the classroom; do I understand what I am really suppose to be doing; am I discovering that perhaps I have not made a good choice about my field of study; do I have a personality conflict with my supervisor; are the office politics not conducive to my way of thinking/working; etc.

After the discussion with your supervisor, if you think it is to your advantage to look elsewhere, contact both your SCEP Coordinator at work and at school. Your school coordinator can assist you in seeking another SCEP assignment.

### **Can I Get Promoted?**

Yes, you can get promoted when you meet what is referred to as the Operating Manual for Qualification Standard for General Scheduled positions requirements and if your performance has been satisfactory in your current position. The operating manual for Qualification Standards for general Schedule positions is a set of standards that have been developed for government wide use outlining the education and/or experience requirements one must have to qualify for a specific job at each grade level.

### **What benefits are available to me?**

As a student employed under SCEP, you are eligible to elect federal life insurance and health benefits plans. These are available if you are scheduled to continue for more than one year in the program and are expected to be in a pay status for at least one-third of the total time from date of appointment to the completion of the program.

If you have no prior service or less than five years of prior civilian service, you are covered by the Federal Employee Retirement System (FERS). FERS is a three part retirement system, social security, basic annuity, and thrift savings plan.

### **Can I receive tuition assistance and help with travel expenses to go back to school?**

This determination is made by your supervisor, if your supervisor has the funds you may receive money to travel back and forth from both your duty station and school after you initially report for duty. However, you cannot receive money for travel if your school is in the vicinity of your work location. If the academic course(s) you wish to take is related to your current and/or target position (the type of position you will be hired for after graduation), you may be given money to pay for tuition, books, fees, and other services related to this training.

If you are authorized to receive tuition assistance, you must have the course approved by your supervisor and the Regional Training Officer located in the Regional Human Resources Office before you register for class. This approval is granted through the use of a training form, SF-182. If you have started your coursework before the training form is signed, Fish and Wildlife Service is prohibited from paying for that course(s).

Prior to accepting tuition and/or travel monies for attending college, you will be required to sign a written agreement to continue employment with Fish and Wildlife Service for a specified period of time after you graduate. Basically, the agreement will require that you work for the Fish and Wildlife Service for as long as you attend classes at Fish and Wildlife Service expense.

## **Back to School**

For instance, if you went to school for a total of 24 months and Fish and Wildlife Service paid for some or all of the expenses, you would be required to work 24 months for the Fish and Wildlife Service, after graduation from college.

It is important that you consider the implications of accepting financial assistance. If you fail to continue your education or refuse an offer of permanent employment after graduation, you may be required to pay back all of the money which you received for travel or tuition expenses. If you work for Fish and Wildlife Service after you graduate but voluntarily leave Fish and Wildlife for a non-Federal position before completing the period of service agreed to, you will be required to repay Fish and Wildlife Service an amount equal to the portion of service which was not completed. You should contact your training officer for more details on this agreement.