

Postdoc Hiring Session: "Insights into government employment"

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- Sarah Converse & Mark Scheuerell, UW College of the Environment faculty members and U.S. Geological Survey Washington Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit leaders

How does the culture in federal agencies change depending on who sits in the Oval Office?

Sarah: In my experience, less than you might think. Generally civil servants work under laws and policies that have been developed over years to decades, and changes don't show up immediately. There can be some changes, including budget changes (though that has more to do with Congress than the President) but in most ways, the work doesn't change much.

What are the pros and cons of conducting research within a federal organization compared to research in academia?

Mark: In general, federal research is funded by appropriations from Congress, which means money arrives every year and alleviates some of the uncertainty that academics feel. However, federal appropriations can be delayed, which often translates into a rush for spending late in the fiscal year. In addition, federal funding typically must be spent within the year it was appropriated, which makes planning for long-term studies difficult. There are also opportunities for federal researchers to apply for competitive grants within and outside of one's own agency that are not available to individuals outside of government.

How does the federal government evaluate the research impact of a research employee? Would you recommend applicants showcase their research in this way in a cover letter and resume?

Sarah: Impact generally is measured in terms of "impact on decisions" and "impact on science" – that is, federal research scientists are judged based on whether their work impacts decisions that are made by managers and whether their work impacts the larger scientific community and the direction of scientific inquiry. I think that touching on both of these elements in a cover letter and CV when applying for a federal research job makes sense.

How do the responsibilities for a position within a Cooperative Research Unit (i.e. within an academic institution) differ from other wildlife and research-related federal positions?

Mark: Federal scientists working in Cooperative Research Units act very much like their regular academic colleagues. We are expected to conduct research, teach courses, mentor students and post-docs, serve the university through committee work, and undertake public outreach. That said, our teaching loads are usually lighter. Researchers at other federal agencies are generally focused much more on their specific research, with service and outreach playing a more minor

role. Although they may occasionally teach a university course or supervise a post-doc, it is much more the exception than the rule.

What is your experience with the workplace culture within these organizations— is it generally a standard 9-5, Mon-Fri work week, or are long hours and weekends common? Is there any flexibility in terms of working from home? Mainly wondering how the day-to-day compares to academia.

Sarah: In my experience, federal employees working in environmental sciences work hard and are dedicated. That said, I think there is less of an unhealthy work-a-holic culture in the government compared to, say, academia. Researchers are possibly the most prone to this because of the culture of science. But, if you are meeting your productivity goals in the government, it is unlikely that anyone will hold it against you if you keep your evenings and weekends to yourself.

Mark: There are different work schedules that employees keep, but they are all designed around a healthy work-life balance. In general, those schedules are limited to 80 hours over the course of two weeks. Some people work 8-hour days, some work 9-hour days and take every other Friday off, and others work variable hour days. Working outside of your normal work schedule is occasionally necessary in standard research positions, but is more common in academically aligned positions such as those in the U.S. Geological Survey Cooperative Research Units.

Could you speak to the hiring outlook for federal agencies in the next few years (given COVID and the economic recession)?

Sarah: It is difficult for me to make specific predictions, but it definitely isn't a given that federal hiring will be down in the next few years. Ebbs and flows in federal hiring are largely determined by the federal budgets set by Congress, and federal hiring doesn't necessarily track the economy as tightly as hiring in other sectors. In fact, sometimes when the economy is down, the government hires more for the purposes of economic stimulus.

What do you see as the potential benefits (or drawbacks) of federal-level over state-level employment?

Mark: Federal agencies are typically more resilient to budget shortfalls and political influence than state agencies, but they can also be more resistant to change. However, there are many areas of research, such as the conservation of at-risk species, that necessarily involve a variety of stakeholders from different agencies, tribal, non-government, and academic organizations. In those cases, federal agencies may have primacy due to legal jurisdiction and can be viewed negatively by others due to their influence.



What are the federal job opportunities for students that receive a Masters vs. a PhD?

Sarah: In management, I think that there are relatively few differences for entry level positions – I think most of these positions are open to people with either degree. In research positions, it will as a rule be hard to land a research position without a PhD, unless it is more of a research support position.

Mark: This is largely dictated by the nature of the work and the length of the appointment. For example, so-called “term” positions may only last for 1-3 years with the goal of accomplishing a set of objectives during that time, and those positions may be filled at the MS level. Some of this is evolving over time as well, such that positions that were once filled at the MS level are now being filled at the PhD level.

Is having a degree at a level higher than the required education a benefit or hindrance for most positions? That is, are jobs that require a masters often filled by people with PhDs?

Sarah: As a general rule, probably a benefit, up to a point. Based purely on anecdotal observation, it seems that there is a certain level of degree inflation as I think there is in many places in the economy.

Is there any sense in trying to network with federal agencies in certain areas (for example, Seattle or Minneapolis) where you’d like to live BEFORE you’ve graduated from a PhD program?

Sarah: Absolutely. If there is a place you know you want to be, start connecting with people at agencies there who work in areas that interest you. Let them know you’ll be moving to the area and you’re interested in the work they do. You might also consider applying for a program like the Presidential Management Fellows because this is a great way to get into a specific agency or office.

Are there any hazards to avoid in federal job-related interviews that differ from a non-federal interview?

Mark: The federal government is adamant about the ethical integrity of its employees. Although it may be tempting to tell someone what you think they might want to hear, it is always important to tell the truth and be honest with your answers to any questions. You should also try hard to limit your answers to the scope of a particular question, and avoid personal opinions that don’t bear on the questions (e.g., espousing political views). Above all, take any interview very seriously and do your homework. Try your best to find out what kinds of questions you might be asked, have an understanding of the organizational structure and the agency’s mandates, and think about the questions you’d like to ask them during an interview.

What is the hiring timeline? Do they need to fill positions quickly? If I'm graduating at the end of winter quarter, how far in advance can I apply for things on USA jobs?

Sarah: It will depend a bit on the position, but generally with federal positions there probably won't be as much of a lag between the interview process and the start date as there might be for academic positions. That said, it never hurts to apply, especially because there are sometimes delays in the hiring process. One caveat: if the position requires a particular degree, there is typically no point in applying until you have that degree in hand.

What is the typical timeline for a Federal hire? Do you think this has been impacted/will continue to be impacted by COVID? How about a direct hire vs. a traditional hire? Thanks!

Sarah: I imagine that there has been some impact of COVID on hiring timelines, possibly slowing things down (though I don't know this for sure). I am not sure what is meant by "direct hire" vs. "traditional hire" unless for "direct hire" you're thinking of non-competitive positions (i.e., positions that don't need to go through a competitive hiring process) like federal post-docs. Non-competitive hires will probably as a rule go faster.

Do you need to send in your transcript to prove credit hours?

Sarah: Yes! Document everything! Your transcripts will be requested in USAJobs. And if a particular degree is required, be sure the date of degree conferral is noted on your transcript.

Could you comment on the difference between engaging in partisan versus political activities? Furthermore, how might a history of public advocacy affect your job prospects? For example, I've published letters to the editor about science policy. Might that be held against me?

Sarah: Hard to say, but on the whole I think the risk is relatively minor, at least for entry level positions in science and management. That said, I'd be prepared to discuss it if it comes up in an interview (i.e., recognizing that there are limits to political speech for federal employees).