

# THE ORGANIZATION OF PROFESSIONAL EMPLOYEES OF THE US DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE



September 2017

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**Important Dates**

National Disability Employment Awareness Month (DEAM) Observance October

Veterans Day Program  
11/2/2017 10-11:00am  
Jefferson Auditorium

Please visit [www.OPEDA.org](http://www.OPEDA.org) for regular updates and additional OPEDA and USDA event information.



**Message From OPEDA President, Ed Dickerhoof**



The recent series of hurricanes have highlighted the need for continuation of strong federal programs in U.S. agriculture and forestry sectors served by USDA professionals. It also demonstrates the benefits of continuing strong relationships with other federal organizations such as The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), as well as, state counterpart agencies and their professional staffs.

USDA Secretary Sonny Perdue has provided very timely leadership since Hurricane Harvey approached landfall in Texas, as pointed out in an August 25<sup>th</sup> USDA News Release: "...We have USDA employees in every county in this nation, and our people can help with a variety of services that may be useful in natural disasters like this one." The same news re-

lease noted that an Incident Management Team had been established to help. It should also be mentioned that "Incident Management Teams" were in fact invented by USDA!!!

On September 18<sup>th</sup>, USDA Secretary Sonny Perdue, participated in a flight review of Florida crop damage done by Hurricane Irma, with Adam Putnam, Florida Agriculture Commissioner. Irma did unprecedented damage to the Central Florida citrus crops, as well as other fruit and vegetable crops in the Southwestern Florida Counties. As a former resident of Florida, and later, as a USDA manager with projects in Florida, I can foresee a tremendous set of challenges ahead in agriculture restoration efforts.

Finally, as we go to press, a New York Times September 24<sup>th</sup> headline reads: "Puerto Rico's Agriculture and Farmers Decimated by Maria." The report then goes on for more than 20 paragraphs about the tremendous damage to the Puerto Rican agriculture based economy that had been recently prospering. But now, there is a food and water emergency!!

Puerto Rico is also home of the U.S. Forest Service's "International Institute of Tropical Forestry," and "The El Yunque National Forest." The Institute is well known for significant research on tropical forestry in the Western Hemisphere. And the El Yunque—formerly known as the Caribbean National Forest—is the largest tract of public land on the island. This land became a National Forest in 1906, and contains over 200 tree and plant species. The status of the Institute and National Forest, in the wake of Hurricane Maria, is undetermined. But, it is almost certain that considerable damage has been sustained.

**OPEDA Celebrates the Retirement of Region 5 Council Member Debra Arnold**



OPEDA celebrates the career of Debra Arnold and 30 years of service with the USDA. Debra retires as Work/Life and Wellness Program Strategist, Office of Human Resources Management. She is described by her colleagues as the heart behind USDA's Wellness and Telework Programs. Before joining the OHRM Team, Debra served as a Rural Development Union President for the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees. She was the first Union President to serve in a full time capacity. Debra also served as the first USDA Labor Management Forum

Chairperson. In addition she has served as a Senior Loan Specialist for Rural Development. Debra plans to enjoy retirement traveling and at home in Tennessee.

The Organization of Professional Employees of the US Department of Agriculture (OPEDA)  
Proudly Recognizes the 2017-2018 Scholarship Award Recipients

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Since 1989 with the support of its members, OPEDA has recognized academic achievement through awarding scholarships to USDA employees and their family members. The John W. Peterson Scholarship is given in recognition of the dedicated service of Mr. Peterson as the 24th President of OPEDA. The Steven "Tom" Stefani Scholarship honors the heroic service and ultimate of sacrifice of this young U. S. Forest Service Range Conservationist, while he was on a voluntary assignment with the USDA Foreign Agriculture Service in Afghanistan. OPEDA is proud to recognize two promising students, Cassandra Boehm and Leah Svoboda. Let's wish them our best in their future endeavors!



Hello, my name is Cassandra Boehm. Thank you so much for this generous award, I am truly grateful. I recently graduated from Century High School and will be entering the University of Mary next month, a small private Catholic University here in Bismarck, North Dakota. I plan to double major in biology and respiratory therapy in addition to swimming for the University. I was born in Nashville, Tennessee. My family and I have lived in the Eastern and Midwestern United States, and over seas due to my dad's Military service. He retired about four years ago and since then we moved up to North Dakota where he has a job with the U.S. Forest Service. My mom works at the First Community Credit Union, a bank here in town. Again thank you so much for this wonderful award.



My name is Leah Svoboda and I have recently graduated from Tivy High School in Kerrville Texas. My parents are Kevin and Rebecca Svoboda and I have two younger siblings Larissa and Colton. I was born in Minnesota but we moved back to Texas when I was six. My Mom is a Soil Conservationist with the NRCS in Kerrville. I have been accepted to attend West Texas A&M University in Canyon Texas. I plan to obtain my bachelor's degree in Civil Engineering. I have always enjoyed building and designing things when I was on our family ranch in Zephyr Texas. I want to be able to take my career and be able to design and build structures that will benefit everyone. I am so grateful for this scholarship that will help in my journey to obtain my degree.

OPEDA welcomes Marian M. Romero as Vice President of Professionalism



Marian was born, grew up, and educated in Manila, Philippines. She migrated into the United States in 1975. After working in the private industry Marian was a Food Service Director for one of the largest food service provider in the world for 18 years. In 2001 she joined the Federal Government. Marian has served as a Program Specialist and Management Analyst for Office of Operations, Program and Policy Support Staff 2014-present. OPEDA celebrates Marian's service and welcomes her as an essential member of the board.

National Disability Employment Awareness Month (DEAM)

OPEDA is proud to support National Disability Employment Awareness Month. Held each October the USDA aims to educate about disability employment issues and celebrate the many and varied contributions of employees with disabilities. OPEDA would like to thank the many individuals that so often go unrecognized for their work everyday to support, and improve the lives of employees with disabilities.

The Office of Operations TARGET Center hosted three new nationwide events in September in support of the TARGET Center Experience Ability: Removing Barriers campaign. The Removing Barriers campaign aligns the TARGET Center's goal of increasing awareness of the abilities of all individuals at USDA with removing barriers in the workplace for employees with disabilities. More information can be found at [www.OPEDA.org](http://www.OPEDA.org) and [www.targetcenter.dm.usda.gov](http://www.targetcenter.dm.usda.gov)

Three bills affecting federal compensation have been introduced: The first two, H.R. 757 and S.255, provide in the House and in the Senate for a 2 percent pay increase and a 1.2 percent increase in locality pay in 1918. Representative Gerry Connolly (VA) sponsored H.R. 757 in the House and Senator Brian Schatz (HI) sponsored S. 255. The bills have been referred to the appropriate committees. The third bill, S.255, introduced by Senator Brian Schatz (HI), would reduce the amount of retirement deducted from the salaries of employees hired in 2013 (2.3% more) and in 2014 and beyond (3.6% more). Employees hired earlier have 0.8% of salary deducted from their paychecks for retirement. The bill has been sent to the appropriate committees.

In H.R. 2929, introduced by Rep. Rob Whitman (WV), the tax credit extended to military employees serving in combat zones is extended to civilian employees. The bill has been referred to the House Committee on Ways and Means.

H.R.1251 introduced by Reo John Garamendi (CA) requires the Social Security Administration and some other retirement programs to use the Consumer Price Index for the Elderly to calculate cost of living adjustments to retirement benefits. The bill has been referred to appropriate committees.

S.873, introduced by Rob Portman (OH) and H.R. 3031, Elijah Cummings (MD) make changes related to federal retirement in regard to withdrawals, payment amounts and withdrawal election deadline in the Thrift Savings Plan. The Senate bill was approved by the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Government Affairs. The House bill was approved by the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform.

H.R. 1408, introduced by Darrell E. Issa (CA) would repeal the Affordable Care Act and place non-federal participants in the federal employees risk pool. OPEDA suggests that our members consider the implications of this bill.

H.R. 1205, introduced by Representative Rodney Davis, and related S. 915, introduced by Senator Sherrod Brown (OH) repeal both the Government Pension Offset (GPO) and the Windfall Elimination Provision (WIP). These bills were referred to appropriate committees.

The H.Con.Res. 71 is the House Concurrent Budget Resolution for FY2018; the bill was introduced by Representative Diane Black (TN). The bill establishes the Congressional Budget for FY 2018 and presents the 2019 – 2027 budgetary levels with instructions for the House Committee on Government Oversight and Reform to find \$32 billion in savings. The bill was approved by the House Budget Committee. There were no cosponsors. If you feel strongly about any of these legislative issues, contact your U.S. Congressman or Senators.

### The Importance of the USDA Work/Life and Wellness Programs

In 2003, the U.S. Senate designated October as National Work and Family Month to recognize that helping employees achieve work-life balance should be a national priority. Managing a balance between work-life responsibilities can be challenging. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) is committed to assisting employees by providing strategies to cope with those challenges and ways to manage the associated stress. During National Work and Family Month, OPEDA will be hosting a Work and Family Day on October 24<sup>th</sup>, 11:00 a.m. through 2:00 p.m. in the South Building Cafeteria and other locations.

The USDA is recognized across the federal government as a leader for work/life and wellness programs and initiatives. Forbes Magazine recently highlighted the USDA as ranking 17th on the list of ‘Top 250 Employers for Flex Jobs’. For five consecutive years, the USDA has received the “Seal of Distinction Award” from “World at Work” and recognized by the National Breastfeeding Coalition as a ‘Breastfeeding Friendly Workplace’. The USDA was highlighted by the Office of Personnel Management for ranking 6th on the 2016 government-wide WellCheck Report that measures how effective agencies are in offering and delivering workplace wellness opportunities to their employees.

Work/Life and Wellness Programs include guidance and support for telework, wellness, nursing mothers and child care tuition assistance. For information on what is available to you, please contact your agency Telework, Wellness or Worklife Coordinator. A list of coordinators, resources and general information can be found on our Web site at <https://www.dm.usda.gov/employ/worklife/index.htm>.



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 Newsletter. Your comments and  
 contributions are welcome.

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 web-[www.opeda.org](http://www.opeda.org)

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The Front Porch

On September 8, 2017 Secretary Sonny Perdue announced the winner of the contest to rename the Secretary’s office. Formerly known as “the cage”, with the idea to rename the office something more welcoming, Secretary Perdue invited USDA employees to submit a suggestion. Pauletta Dusterberg, FSA Indiana State office was the winner with the name, “The Front Porch”. Rockers replaced the previous office chairs providing a feeling of a front porch where people can feel welcome to come and talk with one another.

View the complete video at [www.opeda.org](http://www.opeda.org).

**Opportunity for Retirees, Stay Active Within the USDA-**



Join OPEDA’s mission to enhance the effectiveness of USDA’s employees in the performance of their du-

ties. OPEDA is looking for part time volunteers to assist in pursuing the legislative, member services, and professional development needs of the Organization. Duties may include: preparing documentation to support the needs of the organization, helping to recruit new members, and developing and implementing new plans and programs to support members. This is an opportunity for retirees to stay active within the USDA, and to support the Organization and its employees.

Location: OPEDA National Office, Room 1212, USDA South Building, 14th and Independence Ave., Washington DC These are not paid positions. Volunteers enjoy flexible schedules and choose their area of service. If you are interested in membership or volunteering, please contact Dana Manning, Director of Communications, at [OPEDA@dm.usda.gov](mailto:OPEDA@dm.usda.gov)