



OPEDA NEWSLETTER

Organization of Professional Employees of the
US Department of Agriculture
www.opeda.org

In This Issue	
OPEDA President Message	1
Unsung Hero Winners	2-5
Legislative Activities Update	5-6
Spotlight OPEDA	7
Opportunity for Retirees	7
GEICO	8

VOLUME I

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OPEDA President Message



I am very proud to see OPEDA is gaining momentum in some very important areas. In addition to continuing the tradition of the Unsung Hero Awards, Scholarship Program, Legislative Program, and other efforts, OPEDA is making progress in membership recruitment, providing new training and professional development opportunities, and partnering with Departmental leaders, unions and other Federal-level employee organizations to ensure that our members receive fair compensation, benefits, and recognition for their work.

OPEDA was established in 1929, 90 years ago, and to my knowledge is the oldest employee organization within USDA. Each year, OPEDA takes the opportunity to celebrate public service through its sponsorship of the Unsung Hero Award Program, honoring USDA employees for their outstanding public service both on the job and in their personal lives. Specific to its mission OPEDA works to promote and enhance the effectiveness of USDA employee's public service and professional advancement.

Public Service Recognition Week (PSRW) is celebrated the first week of May since 1985 (beginning on the first Sunday of the month) to honor the men and women who serve our nation as federal, state, county and local government employees. Throughout the country, mayors, governors, agency leaders, communities and public service organizations participate in PSRW by issuing proclamations; hosting award ceremonies and special tribute events; and delivering messages about the value of public service.

Let's talk a bit about heroes. When we look at the definition of hero we are all too familiar with the mythological heroes who achieved great feats in the eyes of dangerous situation. Someone that has been recognized for their great achievements in courage, in character. But today, we are not noting those persons that stand out every day and are held up for all to see and praise. We are honoring the quiet ones, the ones who go through their daily lives whose courage, excellence, achievements and character go unnoticed and unrewarded on a regular basis. Persons who are largely unsung.

As I reviewed the bio of these unsung heroes 5 things stood out to me, they were:

1. Each of our awardees displayed humility in their achievements, they did the work not pointing at how I accomplished a thing but rather how we did something.
2. There was a great display of Empathy, a genuine care and concern for others.
3. They were committed to give more than they took. They were focused on the big picture devoting time and effort to the good of others before their selves. They are results oriented.
4. They displayed courage to do the right thing, not what was popular but to do what was right against the odds. The willingness for follow their own conviction, to take action, and to make changes for the betterment of others. And Finally
5. Consistence towards excellence and teamwork. These individuals no matter how big or small the task worked towards the objective, delivered quality.

So as the president of OPEDA, I salute our 2019 Honorees for their Humility, Empathy, Commitment, Courage, and Excellence. Special thanks to Deputy Secretary Censky and OO Deputy Director Brent James.



2019 Unsung Hero Program

The Unsung Hero Award is an annual event to honor our USDA employees who have consistently provided exceptional service to the American public. These “Unsung Heroes” by their accomplishments, demonstrate their dedication to the public service and their commitment to fulfilling the mission of “the People’s Department.”

Listed below are the 2011 Unsung Hero Award winners:

David Yakovich (OCIO-CEC) – The 28 years of service by Mr. Yakovich sets a benchmark for excellence, innovation and communications support to USDA staff in California, Hawaii, Nevada and the Pacific Basin. During numerous wildfire events in California in 2017 and 2018 David’s preparedness and planning led to immediate deployment of mobile communications device, delivery of additional support systems and fast tracking of the Napa Service Center fiber optic network. His contributions during the recent Camp Fire enabled the county office to act as a central base camp and a Disaster Response Team (DRT) to man and coordinate at a FEMA response center.

Warren Hanson (OCIO-CEC) – Warren Hanson has exceeded departmental expectations for his duties; these duties include teamwork, collaboration and customer service. He has taken on projects that include coordination of MPSII. Following the migration to Windows 10/FSA computer replacement for North Dakota in which almost all in the state were replaced, Warren led the efforts for equipment disposition. He was recalled during the December 2018-January 2019 shutdown to support the branch while the majority of the branch was furloughed.

Jeff Harriss (OCIO-CEC) – Mr. Harriss oversaw the migration of the USDA-wide O365 Multi-Tenant migration; he led the team migrating over 130,000 mailboxes and 3,400 SharePoint sites over the last 12 months. He showed great flexibility in solving complex situations requiring new solutions over short time frames. Challenges overcome include a hurricane, a shutdown, and permission issues across environments and authentication mechanisms for service mailboxes.

Zachary Hoffert (OCIO-CEC) – Mr. Hoffert went far beyond the call of duty as he served as a Group Manager (GM) for just short of a year not only for North Dakota, but also South Dakota while a new Group Manager was sought for South Dakota. As the agencies moved forward with various projects, Zach met not only mission demands, but the interpersonal demands imposed by two teams of very different people as they carried out mission objectives for the agencies.

Allen Smith (ARS-NEA) – Mr. Smith has been largely unrecognized for his efforts related to the maintenance and upkeep of local research facilities. After four years of service on the Animal Care and Use Committee, he volunteered for an additional four years. His almost single-handed efforts to improve the small animal facility resulted in certification of that facility by the Assessment and Accreditation of Laboratory Animal Care International. Most recently he discovered a major water leakage in the laboratory on a Saturday and averted a major disaster.

Kelli Adkins (ARS) – Ms. Adkins has demonstrated selfless dedication not only to her Animal Forage-Animal Production Research Unit (FAPRU), but to the Midwest Area (MWA) of USDA, ARS. Because there is no on-site Administrative Officer, she has assumed these responsibilities in addition to her regular Program Assistant (PA) duties. Since the retirement of the regular Research Leader, she has aided the rotating Acting Research leaders. As a collateral duty, she has assisted in the Position Reviews for scientists in the Midwest Area because of insufficient staff to provide this service. She is also in her second term as a representative for the Midwest Area Diversity and Equal Opportunity Council. Her performance far exceeds that required for an Agricultural Research Service Program Assistant.

Melinda Grow (NRCS) – Because of Melinda Grow’s quick thinking and responsiveness, Ray Miller, a retired member of the NRCS family and current employee of ACES is alive and well today. When Mr. Miller arrived at work at the NRCS office, he suffered a major heart attack. Ms. Grow, with experience as a U.S. Army reserve officer, immediately administered CPR. She instructed others in appropriate actions, used an AED machine on Ray’s chest, and then returned to chest compressions until the First Responders arrived to take over. She then provided instruction for Ray’s wife and family and kept the agency updated on Ray’s status. The fire chief on scene credits Melinda for saving Ray’s life.

Dee Ann Littlefield (NRCS) – Ms. Littlefield is a dynamic and talented individual who routinely puts others before herself. She has helped develop a private-federal corporate partnership with Miller-Coors in 2014 to help benefit private Texas landowners; the program has now been adapted by Idaho, California and Colorado. In 2018 Dee served as the Texas lead and point of contact for NRCS for Hurricane Harvey.

She coordinated 39 disaster workshops in Texas; she led communication efforts for Puerto Rico, Georgia and Florida from

Hurricane Irma, as well as assisting in translation of program fact sheets into Spanish. She has served as an advisor during implementation of farmers.gov. She has taken a leadership role in providing information and assistance to minority producers and employees and served on the Women in NRCS Communications Committee.

Candi Gilpatric (NRCS) – For several years Ms. Gilpatric has been the only agricultural engineer working in Maine’s six southernmost counties and their field offices. During her 25 years of service she has gone above and beyond to help producers and landowners who need assistance with engineering design, and construction. A large number of local folks seek her out to chat at fairs and local agricultural events. She also serves as a tremendous resource for other NRCS staff in her area. She teaches, reviews and encourages new staff and demonstrates a wealth of information and scenarios for problem solving. She can explain even the most complicated engineering concepts in easily understandable terms.

Maeci Carswell (FSA) – Maeci serves as lead program technician at the Flemingsburg Service Center, Kentucky. Producers often ask for Maeci by name, even though she is the newest employee in the Center. She exhibits patience and true kindness for what producers are going through – for example in the Livestock Indemnity Program. She has assisted in the Annual Tractor Parade through Flemingsburg under adverse weather conditions. She takes a leadership role in the local Hispanic Heritage Month; she volunteered for extra duty working in Georgia to learn about a new program not yet implemented in Kentucky.

Marnie Plucienik (FSA) –Marnie has served as a Program Technician for the Farm Service Agency for over 31 years. She traveled to neighboring Van Buren County from St. Joseph County to help on a Farm Records Project that directly impact the farmers served by FSA. She volunteered to learn a new program – Conservation Reserve Program – and was voluntarily assigned to Van Buren County. She played a lead role in a large clean-up project led by new hires; she took on the challenge of serving as Program Technician in Charge in Van Buren County and continues in that role to this day. Although Marnie may say, “I am just doing my job,” this is far from the truth!!

Anne Boyd (RD) – Anne Boyd has delayed her retirement until the end of the calendar year to train a new and inexperienced staff in the working of the Section 525 Program (currently 293 properties). She is spending her remaining time traveling the state and working closely with staff members to ensure maximum benefit and understanding of the key tasks required of each to continue servicing the program. She is selfless in sharing her knowledge and experience with staffers working in Multifamily Housing and dealing with borrowers/management. She takes the lead in working with specialists in compliance reviews, budgets, and similar matters.

Nickie Toomes (RD) – Mrs. Toomes has exceeded all performance expectations in providing the best client service to South Carolina’s rural communities, to first responders, to small municipal governments and to various civic non-profit entities throughout the coastal region of South Carolina. She has gone above and beyond what is expected of a federal employee in solving problems related to funding expensive medical equipment and in rebuilding storm and fire damaged hospital facilities, libraries, first responder stations and police car and ambulance purchase. She spends long hours assisting rural civil and municipal governments meet requirements for federal funding for specific objectives.

Rodney Sebastian (RMA) – Mr. Sebastian applies critical thinking, innovation and communication skills to serve America’s farmers. He has directly engaged the farmers being affected by Agency policies and programs to ensure that their concerns were heard and incorporated into future decisions. This “boots-on-the-ground approach saves reworking and achieves a higher level of buy-in from consumers. He has completed an analysis of insurance rates for the riskier areas which have resulted in appropriate actuarial sound rates that have generated savings for the taxpayers. He is also a seasoned subject matter expert on many crops and livestock insurance products.

Team award – APHIS Plant Protection and Quarantine Safety Officers – Gina Stiltner, Gloria Magana and Candace Robl – Ms. Stiltner, Magana and Robl have kept us trained and safe in the field from ticks, snakes, aggressive dogs, poison ivy, poison oak, giant hogweed, electric shock, weather exposure and dehydration. They obtained scarce insect repellent resources and efficiently informed the staff of hazards during short morning briefings in a short 30 days. Serving as sequential safety leaders, they provided seamless support to the incident responders. As a result of their training, emergency work did not take precedence over personal safety. They actively cared about every member of the response teams.

Team award – OHA-NAD Deputy Regional Directors – Amanda Urbanek and Tezra Woody (Office of Hearings and Appeals, National Appeals Division, Southern Regional Office) - Urbanek and Woody stepped in to assist in handling and take on themselves a very large number of appeals cases sent to the Southern Regional Office.

During this timeframe, Amanda and Tezra both completed their Deputy Regional Director duties but also filled the role of Administrative Judges, In addition to performing these duties, they conducted training sessions with the Farm Service Agency and National Resources Conservation Service employees. Their efforts improved both the quality of adverse decisions and the preparedness of the agency representatives during the appeals process.

2019 U.S. Forest Service Unsung Hero Selections

Kimberly Baca, Region 3 - Kimberly exemplifies several other Unsung Hero nominees who also performed well above their position duties. Kimberly not only does her job as payroll clerk very well, but she also takes on many other tasks. For example, she helps the Customer Service Representative (CSR)—who is swamped on a seasonal basis. She was also cited for filling in for three months when someone with major responsibilities, was sick for three months. And finally, she organizes employee parties honoring fellow employees and retirees; as well as sends flowers to employees who are sick, or have loved ones pass away.

Antoinette Davis, Region 8 - Antoinette “Tonee” Davis, working as a Natural Resource Specialist on the Ocala National Forest in Florida over the last 19 years, has provided educational opportunities for over 20,000 children to learn about the beautiful ecosystems in Florida. She utilizes the Smokey Bear, Woodsy Owl, and USDA People’s Garden, and Project Learning Tree programs when working with the many children in the area. She has established strong relationships with many organizations such as the 4H, Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts and many other groups. She is often the public face of the Ocala National Forest.

David Spliethof , Region 1 - David Spliethof is a lead plane pilot for the US Forest Service, Pacific Southwest Region who lost his house in the spectacular Carr Fire. Mr. Spliethof continued to fly as a lead plane pilot for days after he knew he lost his house and all of his families’ belongings....Dave said there is no place he would rather be then flying and helping others, instead of feeling sorry for himself.... The nominator stated: “:.this guy gets in his airplane and flies into the smoke and flames and drops a (colored) puff of smoke where... the tankers behind him ... drop (fire retardant)...It is a dangerous, exhausting job, requiring laser focus and heroic calm under pressure.”

Gerald Bauer, International Tropical Forestry Institute (ITF), Puerto Rico - Gerald Bauer has worked for the USDA. Forest Service for more than 40 years. He has pioneered the use of photography, visual arts and communications in the region. NGO’s, local communities, students and the public at large use his creations to create environmental awareness, which improved the lives of thousands of people in this region. Especially notable was Gerald Bauer’s pioneering efforts in Nicaragua to promote conservation and social awareness of natural resources. Unfortunately funding has largely ended, and many asylum seekers at the US/Mexican Boarder are now from Nicaragua.

Rob Heavirland, “Rob”. Region 9 - Outside of work, in his personal time, Rob created /designed a prototype portable helicopter landing pad that could be used in “tough” wilderness areas where there is a growing need to land to fight fires. Successful field test demonstrate that a fire crew of two can deploy the portable landing pad in a swampy area. And, Rob’s invention was successfully used for the first time during the 2018 Minnesota Wildland Fire Academy in Grand Rapids. MN.

Sharon Wallace, Region 8 - Sharon, as the Forest Supervisor of the El Yunque National Forest in Puerto Rico overcame many challenges after being grazed by hurricane Irma-- and then hit full on by category 5 hurricane Maria. Hurricane Maria completely devastated Puerto Rico and the El Yunque National Forest in September, 2017.

Sharon Wallace organized forest partners, businessmen and women to provide basic services employees and the community who lost their homes. There was a need for food and water, as well as electricity. She established a satellite phone at her house to communicate with Forest Service employees, local government, and others. Her extra efforts included organization of a community meeting at the Ovidio de Jesus Baseball Stadium—attended by more than 1000 people to facilitate recovery efforts.

Marion Glaser, Region 10 - On September 3, 2018 Ms. Glaser was on routine foot patrol on a trail in the Seward Ranger District of the Chugach National Forest in Alaska, “when a panicked and blood covered gentlemen came running down the trail saying his wife had an arrow in her leg up the trail.

While another U.S. Forest Service employee on the trail went with the husband down to the trail head to get on to get expert emergency medical help; Marion proceeded up the trail, where she found victim with an arrow buried deeply in her upper leg.

Marion applied direct pressure and a bandage to the leg and she covered the wounded woman with a sleeping bag and for several hours kept pressure on the injury—all the while providing comforting words to the woman, and even singing hymns to her. At dusk, Alaska State Police and Paramedic arrived, and helicopter evacuation was arranged to transport the wounded woman out of the forest.

It was later determined that the arrow-- accidentally dropped by a moose hunter-- was within one centimeter of the lady's Femoral Artery. With expert first aid, and follow up emergency room treatment the severely wounded lady made a full recovery.

Chris Peterson, Region 9 - Chris Peterson is the Fire Staff Officer on the Huron-Manistee National Forest in Michigan. This forest experiences about 150 fires per year. And with the checkerboard pattern of ownership it is critical that there is a good relationship with the Michigan Department of Natural Resources. Under Chris Peterson's direction, the Huron-Manistee National Forest with new external partnerships, the area is now a model for how fire management should be implemented and how communities should be served.

Chris Peterson is also the Eastern Region's Emergency Medical Services (EMS) Coordinator, and this has been integral in the development of a national program to ensure employees have access to quality emergency medical care. Chris also serves as the Region 9 representative to the National Fire Equipment Committee.

As a member of the Committee on Emergency Management. In 2017 Chris assisted with the hurricane recovery in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

FS Law Enforcement & Investigations, Patrick Legg and Nicholas Scholz (Law Enforcement Officers, FS) - While off-duty near the Lolo Hot Springs Campground, MT, Law Enforcement Officer (LEO) Patrick Legg observed an altercation between a man and a woman. The man was carrying a firearm and made threats. Legg also learned from the argument that a vehicle was wrecked and a baby was lost in the forest. 911 had been called. After detaining the male, Legg and another individual initiated a search for the baby. When the Missoula County Deputies arrived, Legg turned over the suspect to them. LEO Scholz arrived at 12:30 am and after coordinating with local law enforcement, began to search for the child. At about 2:30 am Scholz and a Missoula County Deputy found the child face down in a shallow hole covered with sticks. The child was rushed to the waiting ambulance and transported to the hospital. Legg and Scholz saved the life of the child and probably averted other crimes that could have resulted from physical attack(s) and assault with the handgun.

FS Custer Gallatin NF Avalanche Center, Doug Chabot, Eric Knoff and Alex Marienthal (Custer-Gallatin National Forest Avalanche Center, FS) - An avalanche occurring very early in the season (September 17) began a challenging winter for Chabot, Knoff and Marienthal. In one of the busiest and most successful years of service, this team shared their knowledge and skill in minimizing the risk and exposure in avalanche country in an easy to learn format and environment. In addition the Avalanche Center undertook an extra effort to reach young adults, especially those at Montana State University. The series, "Get Avalanche Smart," reached 58,600 viewers and increased enrollment in other lectures and a field session. The filmed "Dashboard Talks"

Legislative Activities Update - Fed/Postal Coalition

EEOC Makes It Easier for Feds to File Discrimination Appeals New tool allows feds to "finally" manage cases online, leveling the playing field with agency attorneys.

Federal employees will have an easier time following up on discrimination complaints against their agencies with the creation of a new online tool.

While non-federal workers could long file claims with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission online, EEOC just launched the portal for feds on Tuesday. The new tool will enable federal employees to make adjustments to their cases, add information and request hearings.

In addition to filing requests for hearings and appeals, employees can update their contact information, add attorney data, check the status of their cases and respond to an agency's request to engage in alternative dispute resolution. Employees enrolled in the portal will receive email notifications whenever new information has been added to their cases.

"This secure online system is a faster and easier way for federal employees, agencies and the EEOC to communicate, send and receive documents, and track case status," EEOC Chair Janet Dhillon said. "We expect it to greatly improve the efficiency and transparency of the EEOC's hearings and appeals of discrimination complaints brought by federal employees and applicants." Federal employees still cannot file an initial charge against an agency through the online portal. That must occur through the agency's internal equal employment opportunity program. Initial submissions of evidence of discrimination and requests for EEO counseling must still go through that process as well.

EEOC published several user guides and frequently asked questions pages to help feds navigate the online tool. Employees can continue to request hearings, file appeals and otherwise manage their cases through writing and mailing paper documents, though EEOC cautioned that approach would delay the process.

"The portal is the fastest and easiest way for all parties to communicate, send and receive documents, and track case status," the agency said.

Attorneys can manage employees' cases online once their names have been added to the case. Authorized agency representatives can also see all information submitted into a complainant's case. The online tool will notify an agency whenever a request for a hearing or appeal has been filed, saving the employee from having to separately mail notifications to both EEOC and the agency, as was previously the case.

Agency attorneys already had their own online portal, according to Heather White, a partner at the Federal Practice Group, but it was not available to employees making claims. Complainants and their representatives in recent years have made all their filings and communications via email, leaving employees to "stress about file size" and the disparate requests from various EEOC administrative judges.

"Obviously it's better to be able to upload it quickly to the system and go home and have dinner," White said. "It's good to at least finally be online and not be at a disadvantage on filings."

White noted the Merit Systems Protection Board, the other main agency through which federal employees can launch complaints against their agencies, has maintained an e-filing system for years. EEOC's portal, which it has slowly rolled out over the last few weeks, still has some needed improvements, White said. She noted it was surprising it had taken this long for EEOC to stand up an e-filing system of its own, and she was "little shocked" at the rudimentary nature of the system. "I'm sure there will be many upgrades," she said.

The House of Representatives passed the fiscal year 2020 (FY20) Financial Services and General Government appropriations bill, H.R. 3351, in a 224-196 vote. The legislation provides federal employees with a modest, but much needed, average pay raise of 3.1 percent, pushing Congress one step closer to blocking the president's FY20 budget recommendation to freeze federal pay. This appropriations legislation also blocks funding for the administration's Office of Personnel Management (OPM) reorganization plan, including the transfer of any agency functions to the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) or General Services Administration (GSA). Leading lawmakers, both Republican and Democrat, have expressed serious concerns with the plan.

The reorganization plan seeks to fold OPM's programmatic functions into GSA, including important services such as federal retirement programs. The proposed merger puts these functions at serious risk of not receiving the dedicated resources and attention necessary to properly serve the federal community. The proposal also seeks to transfer OPM's personnel policy functions to the Executive Office of the President, subjecting employee policy decisions to political influence from not only the current administration but also all those to come. NCEPS has continually opposed the plan.

In addition, the House voted 220-197 to pass the fiscal 2020 National Defense Authorization Act, which includes yet another provision to block the Trump administration from merging the Office of Personnel Management and the General Services Administration.

Rep. Gerry Connolly, D-Va., proposed an amendment that would prevent the Trump administration from taking any administrative action to implement its controversial proposal to send most of OPM's functions to GSA, and vest all of its existing regulatory authority in a non-Senate confirmed presidential appointment within the Office of Management and Budget. The House voted 247-182 in favor of Connolly's amendment. A similar provision was included in an appropriations package passed by the House last month.

We will continue to keep our membership abreast of the proposed OPM Reorganization.

Spotlight Angelique M. Moss



Angelique M. Moss works for the Executive Services Division within the Office of Operations. The mission of the Executive Services Division is to provide administrative program support, travel management, coordination and management of facilities for the Office of the Secretary and supporting under-Secretaries in the DC metropolitan area, this includes responsibilities for office architecture, engineering services; information technology, building management activities, such as systems operation, coordination of repairs and maintenance; warehouse and supply services, space design and alterations, coordination of printing and duplication services. The office also offer audio visual media production services as well as an Event Planning staff and CRMS Schedule.

Angelique serves on the event planning staff. She is bright, articulate, and hardworking. Her enthusiasm for the job comes thought in all she does. Angelique has a positive attitude that makes her a pleasure to work with. She is responsible for maintaining the smooth operation of events and meetings, which involves in-depth communication with customers. Angelique deserves recognition for all the hard work and commitment she has shown toward OPEDA. She is motivated, intelligent, caring, and empathetic, and everyone have learned and benefited from working alongside her during the process of the Unsung Hero.

The Organization of Professional Employees of the U.S. Department of Agriculture and Membership

For over 85 years, since it was established in April 8, 1929, OPEDA has represented professional employees and retirees of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Unlike unions, this representation is extended to both managers and employees. OPEDA has worked to enhance the effectiveness of members in the performance of their public service as well as to protect and advance USDA employee interests through organized and concerted effort. OPEDA promotes and conducts public service activities through meetings, seminars, workshops and training, and award programs designed to improve the economic and professional advancement of OPEDA members. OPEDA also works in affiliation with several other professional organizations representing local, state, and national public employee issues in order to promote the efficient and effective operation of agencies of the USDA.

OPEDA invites you to join our organization and help us: (1) to cooperate with other professional groups in government to gain a more effective voice on behalf of professionals; (2) to secure credit towards retirement for all prior Federal-State service of USDA employees; and (3) to assure fair treatment of all USDA employees. Membership is open to all USDA employees and retirees regardless of age, sex, race, religion, nationality, or political affiliation.



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 duties. 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 Richard Fierroz, VP Public Service/Director of Communications, at OPEDA@dm.usda.gov.



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*The Organization of Professional Employees of
the US Department of Agriculture*

Thank you for reading the OPEDA
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