

Federal Careers Forum Q&A responses

What federal resources have you used to learn about creating and maintaining budgets, particularly while working for the EPA and USGS?

Sarah Spaulding: I did not know anything about budgets before my federal job. I learned everything on the job! The budget tools are agency specific.

Stephanie Sharuga: Many agencies offer professional development coursework for their employees. You can often find those kinds of opportunities for learning more about topics like that.

When coming back to grad school, I was very conscious of the conversation about being "over qualified" for positions. My advisor explains that he hasn't seen this in the field, but I still hear this conversation around obtaining a PhD and trying to get a job in the natural resources. What are other people's experiences?

Stephanie Sharuga: I actually did experience this quite a bit as I was trying to find a more permanent job over the years. Most jobs outside of academia didn't necessarily require a PhD. As a result, I was often seen as overqualified (and maybe perceived as that I would want higher pay or get too bored with the job) or that I wanted to only be a researcher because of my PhD. It was really frustrating! But...the federal government was a lot more flexible and open about having a PhD than any other type of employer I had applied/interviewed with. The fact I had a PhD just meant that I was more qualified for higher level jobs but did not preclude me from ones below my "ideal" job experience level.

What types of opportunities are there in the sciences in the federal government for folks who have a master's degree (but not a PhD)?

Sarah Spaulding: Hi Erika, The USGS has opportunities for people with both undergraduate and MS degrees - in science. Find them in USA jobs, or better, contact the offices where you are interested in working.

Laura Brandt: There are also a lot of opportunities with USFWS at a GS 7 or 9 level. GS-9 requires 2 full years of graduate education or a master's degree

Holly Sweat: Likewise at the Smithsonian. We have several GS/IS 7 and 9 positions that come up for research technicians and program coordinators.

Stephanie Sharuga: Also to note...For most federal jobs, including higher level ones, you don't NEED a PhD. Most of the scientists I work with don't have one (they typically have a Master's or a Bachelor's with years of experience).

How should one prepare for an interview in the federal government?

Stephanie Sharuga: Research! Make sure you really know the position you're applying for well (review that job announcement until you know everything in it). Also do your research on the agency and specific division you're applying for. When we're doing interviews, we don't expect people to know everything about us and what we do (we can't even keep track of everything because we do so much)...but you should know fairly good detail on the basics of the place you're applying to and ideally people you'll be interviewing with (it's totally OK to Google the interviewers prior to your interview). And finally, really make sure you are tying your experience and expertise back to the job requirements. Even if you don't have experience specific to a particular topic, see if you can relate the skills and experience you DO have to it.

Hi, I have a bachelor's in biology and and a Master's in biology education. I currently work as a school teacher, and I am struggling to decide what kind of career I should go into from here. Who should I go to seek advice in this dilemma? I've talked to university professors, but I was wondering if there was anyone else I could discuss with.

Sarah Spaulding: Great question. I think an important part of the career process is identifying, for you, the type of environment that you work best in. There have been a number of books on this topic (What color is my parachute? is a popular one). It is worth the time to ask yourself, do you like working alone or with people? what kind of work environment - field, lab, office? I find it is helpful to think about the situations where you thrive.

As a later stage PhD student interested in a federal career, would you recommend exploring both academic and federal post-docs? Is one seen as more valuable when applying for full time positions following a post-doc? Or is a post-doc even necessary? Thank you!

Stephanie Sharuga: Depending on what you want to do, a post-doc is not necessary. I think either will provide you with valuable experience and professional development opportunities. Just make sure you shape whatever post-doc that you do to what you want for your longer-term career. A post-doc can be a great opportunity to really start shaping where your career goes from there.

How would you recommend balancing roles in academia and federal agencies--do they complement or conflict--and do you have an example?"

Sarah Spaulding: I find a strong complement! I have an office and lab at the University of Colorado, where I mentor students and participate in a research institute and I work for the USGS. I gain so much by having perspectives of academia and federal service!

When hiring, do you have a preference for including a cover letter or not? And do you prefer the USAJobs resume template, or something else?

Stephanie Sharuga: I have personally never had a strong preference regarding cover letters. One practical thing we often do use them for when hiring in my agency is as a screen for someone's "writing ability" since being an effective written communicator is so important to our jobs. I personally have not ever used the USAJobs resume template when applying to jobs, and typically we don't have a preference for the resume style. The key thing is making sure you include A LOT OF DETAIL, regardless of what style of resume you submit. Getting past the USAJobs screenings to the actual interview stage is all about us seeing everything about your experience so we can gauge your qualifications in relation to the position we're hiring for. Worry less about style or length (my USAJobs CV is at least 15 pages long, for context), but rather focus on content instead!

Chris Oishi: I always like to see cover letters that demonstrate that the applicant actually has some knowledge of the position they are applying for (e.g., the location, the type of work, research that is conducted there).

When considering a federal career, how important is it for an applicant to be flexible with where they are going to work and what their responsibilities are?

Stephanie Sharuga: I would say very important to be flexible. Many federal positions require us wearing many hats and having a diverse range of responsibilities. We also often have changing needs depending on the current government administration. You need to be open to doing work within your existing realm of experience but also open to evolving and learning/doing new things. You will also find that despite having a particular background/field of study, you aren't only limited to working one particular type of job or agency if you're willing to be flexible. A lot of skills are highly transferable!

Did you do a post-doc? Is that typical for your position and was your choice beneficial for your career path?

Sarah Spaulding: I had a postdoc that allowed me to obtain training (taxonomy and phylogeny) that I did not have in graduate school (aquatic ecology). Then in my federal position I found a way to bridge the disciplines and distinguishing my expertise.

From the interviews, I am hearing there is a lot of office work involved with many of these jobs. My biggest passion is spending time in the field. What kind of professional jobs focus on fieldwork?

Chris Oishi: There are a variety of technician and professional scientist positions that can involve lots of time spent in the field. These typically require a BS or MS. For PhD level research scientists, there can still be good opportunities for fieldwork, especially if your office location is close to your research site. For career advancement, there may indeed be more time spent in the office, writing grants and papers; however, this can also be very rewarding.

Laura Brandt: Agree with Chris- there are field based positions in USFWS many on National Wildlife Refuges- these are generally 7/9/11 positions.

For the federal employees on the panel, what are your top tips for getting hired with a federal agency? Specifically, for someone with only experience in academia, what language should I use or ways to tailor my resume/cover letter to the position would help convince a hiring team that I'm able to make the jump into a govt position?

Sarah Spaulding: I think the most difficult part of landing a federal position is getting past the self-rating part of the application. Unfortunately, people tend to rank themselves conservatively. Rank yourself as HIGH as you can, supported by the experience in your CV. I think changing between academia and government is a plus, not a negative.

Stephanie Sharuga: The key thing is making sure you include A LOT OF DETAIL in your application materials (especially your resume). This includes listing the actual names of coursework you've taken (not just relying on your transcripts - I learned that the hard way), hours worked for specific roles, tasks and accomplishments, etc.. Specifically tie back your experience in your resume to specific tasks and requirements listed in the job announcement. Explain how skills and experience you have can be applicable to the job roles even if it's not in the same field. Make it as obvious as possible for the person reviewing the applications. Getting past the USAJobs screenings to the actual interview stage is all about us seeing everything about your experience so we can gauge your qualifications in relation to the position we're hiring for. Worry less about style or length (my USAJobs CV is at least 15 pages long, for context), but rather focus on content instead!

Stephanie Sharuga: And as Sarah mentioned, try not to be too conservative on your self-ratings. If it's something you've done regularly, are considered a subject matter expert in it, people ask you for your expertise on, etc....You are considered an expert (or maybe one level down). Just make sure your resume backs up your ratings with details.

I'm hoping to defend my Ph.D. in the fall, but I don't have any connections and don't know anyone who works in the federal government. Any tips for applying for federal jobs?

Holly Sweat: I would encourage you to consider doing a postdoctoral fellowship in the federal system (e.g., <https://fellowships.si.edu/fellowship-programs>). This is a great opportunity to get connected and learn more about the ins and outs of a government job.

Stephanie Sharuga: The nice thing about federal jobs is that you don't need to know someone to apply or be hired into one. In fact...in most cases, because of how the federal job competition system works, it actually does NOT help you to know someone. The key thing is searching for jobs that are a good potential fit for you. When you find one you want to apply to but maybe want to understand a bit better before applying, don't be afraid to look up the agency/division the job is with and looking on that agency's website for someone who works there and feel free to

reach out to them to chat more about what it's like working there if you have questions. It can help inform you as you put together your application materials because it will give you a better sense of the work you would be doing and who you would be working with.

For someone with a PhD in ecology, but not directly in conservation or management, what are some suggestions for next career steps for someone looking to get a job in those fields?

Chris Oishi: Fundamental training in ecology is critical for conservation and management, so that's a great start. I'd look across the various agencies to find positions or groups that your specific expertise is relevant. I'd also suggest doing a little background research on the agency's mission and frame your application in a way that relates.

Stephanie Sharuga: Look for fellowships or independent courses you can take that help bridge the gap between ecology research and the policy/resource management/conservation side. Any experience you can get (either paid or volunteer) working at the science policy/management interface will be very valuable.

What are some pathways for international students looking to land federal roles, considering that federal roles sometimes are not tailored for noncitizens?

Chris Oishi: One option are ORISE (Oak Ridge Institute for Science and Education) fellowships. Many post-doc and post-masters positions with federal agencies are administered through here. These are open to non-US citizens.

Holly Sweat: At the Smithsonian, we have both federal and trust positions. The federal positions typically require US citizenship, but the trust positions are often open to anyone eligible to work in the US.

For any panelist, during the job application process did you experience any gaps in your skillset relative to job qualifications and how did you overcome these? Or what advice would you have in this regard?

Laura Brandt: It wasn't so much a gap that I found when applying, but one that I was aware of while still in Grad School. To qualify for a 486 (wildlife biologist) series job in FWS you have to had to have 9 credits of botany or equivalent (plus a bunch of other credits that I had). When I learned that I made sure I had an independent study class that would fulfill the 3 credits I was missing. So advice would be to try to think about where you might want to get a job and check requirements while still in school. You can also take classes/training after you finish grad school to fill in the gaps.

What advice would you give graduate students in their last year for finding/applying for jobs?

Allison Roy: Near the end of your grad program, consider applying for a USFWS Directorate Fellowship. It's a short program (typically ~12 weeks in the summer) and gives direct federal hiring status. The [Knauss Fellowship](#) is another great opportunity for students near the end, especially if interested in policy.

It has been awesome to hear about all the different paths and positions. As mentioned in some of the interviews, it sounds like applying for federal jobs has specific requirements that can be difficult to adequately address without guidance from someone who works for the agency. What would you suggest to someone that wants to apply to government positions but doesn't have any current connections in the federal government?

Laura Brandt:

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For any panelist, What are some tips when preparing for an interview with a federal agency? Are there any questions you should ask the hiring manager?

Sarah Spaulding: Do your best to find out who the person is who is doing the hiring. Most people are happy to tell applicants about the position. I have even asked if I can stop by to meet the hiring person - it means a lot to a person hiring to know you as an individual.

How would someone distinguish between a federal position and a trust position?

Sarah Spaulding: Follow your passion. I think it is most important to do what you find most interesting and challenging. I think by "trust position" you mean some sort of non-governmental organization? If so, these are much smaller organizations, so more nimble but fewer resources.

As a current school teacher (my BS is in biology, MS in biology education) looking to switch into a more-field based career in biology/ecology, what kind of internships would you recommend looking into that I don't have to leave my job? I would love opportunities to shadow a federal scientist if possible. (any resource for where to find these positions would be great too!)

Stephanie Sharuga: I think this will vary greatly by agency and what you're looking for in an internship. If you are OK with unpaid experience shadowing someone, there may be some opportunities to directly reach out to agencies/people who work there and just ask... We regularly receive requests from students to shadow us to learn more about what we do, and we also participate in mentoring programs that could maybe be an avenue for you to explore more too. I would say just reach out and ask directly what opportunities there might be.

This is a very specific question, but when filling out the agency questionnaires about whether you qualify for specific GS levels on usajobs.gov they ask whether you have the particular amount of experience, a certain level of education, or a combination of both that when added together satisfies the needs. If you have BOTH the experience and the education, what answer is the most ideal/looks the best? A) experience, b) education, or c) a combination?

Laura Brandt: I think I would start with the level of education required first and if you meet that make sure it is clear on your transcripts. Then state that you have the education (based on transcripts) AND experience. The education is more clear cut and easier for someone going through a checklist to check yes.

In your positions how are research questions or projects identified. Do individuals, groups or organization leadership set the agenda?

Allison Roy: In the USGS Cooperative Research Units, we work with our Cooperators to design research to meet their needs. We also have the flexibility to apply for funding to do research that interests us, as long as the cooperators are OK with it.

Chris Oishi: In the Forest Service's Research and Development, research scientists have quite a bit of flexibility to develop research questions, provided they are within the scope of the agency's and work unit's mission. You may need to compete for grant funding to support the work.

How common are fully remote positions in federal agencies?

Chris Oishi: I think they are becoming more common. I've seen quite a few with USDA-NRCS for example.

Stephanie Sharuga: They are more common now than they were, but many agencies are starting to go back to limiting how many people can work remotely.

Did any of the panelists go into the workforce specifically looking for a government job? Why did you choose this over working in industry or for an NGO?

Allison Roy: I went into the workforce specifically trying to get an experience outside of academia during a postdoc. A federal postdoc was where I landed. I ultimately went to

academia but returned to a federal position. The federal position was particularly attractive for job stability and pay.

How flexible are agencies in terms of duty stations you can report to? For example, could you work for the US Fish & Wildlife Service and report to a National Park or other DOI office?

Sarah Spaulding: One way to work across agencies is through an Interagency Agreement (IAG). I was initially hired to work for the USGS, at an EPA office. In this case, EPA had funds for hiring, but not the ability to hire. There are many types of IAGs that allow agencies to cross funds. I now support an IAG with the National Park Service - so USGS provides NPS with money to accomplish particular water quality studies.

Laura Brandt: Within USFWS it is very region/station specific. My position is now based out of our regional office in Atlanta and my duty station is at the University of Florida Fort Lauderdale Research and Education Center. Key is to have a partner who is willing to have you there and a supervisor willing to let you work in that location. A lot depends on your duties and if having a different duty station supports those duties.

For those that did do a post-doc with their agency, where are those positions posted and how do you find them? Are they positions that are at a university and in conjunction with an agency or at the agency directly and therefore posted on USA jobs etc? If on USA Jobs what are they listed under?

Allison Roy: I initially got a postdoc at the USEPA through ORISE then I applied to and transitioned to a federal postdoc. The ORISE position was posted on Ecolog, I believe.

Chris Oishi: I did a postdoc with the Forest Service, but recently, the postdoc positions are mostly being run through ORISE or universities. If they do appear on usajobs, i think they might appear as something like a GS-11 Research Ecologist with a term appointment (as opposed to a permanent position).