

debt to make sure that it is valid and past due.

(b) If the Secretary determines that any of the requirements of paragraph (a) of this section have not been met, no determination of indebtedness shall be made and salary offset will not proceed until the Secretary is assured that the requirements have been met.

§ 3.55 Notice requirements before offset.

Except as provided in § 3.51(d), salary offset will not be made unless the Secretary first provides the employee with a minimum of 30 calendar days written notice. This Notice of Intent to Offset Salary (Notice of Intent) will state:

(a) That the Secretary has reviewed the records relating to the debt and has determined that a debt is owed, the amount of the debt, and the facts giving rise to the debt;

(b) The Secretary's intention to collect the debt by means of deduction from the employee's current disposable pay until the debt and all accumulated interest are paid in full;

(c) The amount, frequency, approximate beginning date, and duration of the intended deductions;

(d) An explanation of the Department's requirements concerning interest, penalties and administrative costs; unless such payments are waived in accordance with 31 U.S.C. 3717 and § 3.34;

(e) The employee's right to inspect and copy Department records relating to the debt;

(f) The employee's right to enter into a written agreement with the Secretary for a repayment schedule differing from that proposed by the Secretary, so long as the terms of the repayment schedule proposed by the employee are agreeable to the Secretary;

(g) The right to a hearing conducted by a hearing official on the Secretary's determination of the debt, the amount of the debt, or percentage of disposable pay to be deducted each pay period, so long as a petition is filed by the employee as prescribed by the Secretary;

(h) That the timely filing of a petition for hearing will stay the collection proceedings;

(i) That a final decision on the hearing will be issued at the earliest practical date, but not later than 60 cal-

endar days after the filing of the petition requesting the hearing, unless the employee requests, and the hearing officer grants, a delay in the proceedings;

(j) That any knowingly false or frivolous statements, representations, or evidence may subject the employee to:

(1) Disciplinary procedures appropriate under 5 U.S.C. chapter 75, 5 CFR part 752, or any other applicable statutes or regulations;

(2) Penalties under the False Claims Act, 31 U.S.C. 3729-3731, or any other applicable statutory authority; or

(3) Criminal penalties under 18 U.S.C. 286, 287, 1001, and 1002 or any other applicable statutory authority;

(k) Any other rights and remedies available to the employee under statutes or regulations governing the program for which the collection is being made;

(l) That amounts paid on or deducted for the debt which are later waived or found not owed to the United States will be promptly refunded to the employee, unless there are applicable contractual or statutory provisions to the contrary;

(m) The method and time period for requesting a hearing; and

(n) The name and address of an official of USDA to whom communications should be directed.

§ 3.56 Request for a hearing.

(a) Except as provided in paragraph (c) of this section, an employee must file a petition for a hearing, that is received by the Secretary not later than 30 calendar days from the date of the Department's notice described in § 3.55, if an employee wants a hearing concerning:

(1) The existence or amount of the debt; or

(2) The Secretary's proposed offset schedule (including percentage).

(b) The petition must be signed by the employee and should identify and explain with reasonable specificity and brevity the facts, evidence and witnesses which the employee believes support his or her position. If the employee objects to the percentage of disposable pay to be deducted from each check, the petition should state the objection and the reasons for it.

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(c) If the employee files a petition for hearing later than the 30 calendar days as described in paragraph (a) of this section, the hearing officer may accept the request if the employee can show that the delay was because of circumstances beyond his or her control or because of failure to receive notice of the filing deadline (unless the employee has actual notice of the filing deadline).

§ 3.57 Result if employee fails to meet deadlines.

An employee will not be granted a hearing and will have his or her disposable pay offset in accordance with the Secretary's offset schedule if the employee:

- (a) Fails to file a petition for a hearing as prescribed in § 3.56; or
- (b) Is scheduled to appear and fails to appear at the hearing.

§ 3.58 Hearings.

(a) If an employee timely files a petition for a hearing under § 3.56, the Secretary shall select the time, date, and location for the hearing.

(b)(1) Hearings shall be conducted by an appropriately designated hearing official; and

(2) Rules of evidence shall not be adhered to, but the hearing official shall consider all evidence that he or she determines to be relevant to the debt that is the subject of the hearing and weigh it accordingly, given all of the facts and circumstances surrounding the debt.

(c) USDA will have the burden of going forward to prove the existence of the debt.

(d) The employee requesting the hearing shall bear the ultimate burden of proof.

(e) The evidence presented by the employee must prove that no debt exists or cast sufficient doubt such that reasonable minds could differ as to the existence of the debt.

§ 3.59 Written decision following a hearing.

Written decisions provided after a hearing will include:

- (a) A statement of the facts presented at the hearing to support the

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nature and origin of the alleged debt and those presented to refute the debt;

(b) The hearing officer's analysis, findings and conclusions, considering all of the evidence presented and the respective burdens of the parties, in light of the hearing;

(c) The amount and validity of the alleged debt determined as a result of the hearing; and

(d) There payment schedule (including percentage of disposable pay), if applicable.

(e) The determination of the amount of the debt at this hearing is the final agency action on this matter.

§ 3.60 Review of Departmental record related to the debt.

(a) *Notification by employee.* An employee who intends to inspect or copy Departmental records related to the debt must send a letter to the Secretary stating his or her intention. The letter must be received by the Secretary within 30 calendar days of the date of the Notice of Intent.

(b) *Secretary's response.* In response to the timely notice submitted by the debtor as described in paragraph (a) of this section, the Secretary will notify the employee of the location and time when the employee may inspect and copy Departmental records related to the debt.

§ 3.61 Written agreement to repay debt as alternative to salary offset.

(a) *Notification by employee.* The employee may propose, in response to a Notice of Intent, a written agreement to repay the debt as an alternative to salary offset. Any employee who wishes to do this must submit a proposed written agreement to repay the debt which is received by the Secretary within 30 calendar days of the date of the Notice of Intent.

(b) *Secretary's response.* The Secretary will notify the employee whether the employee's proposed written agreement for repayment is acceptable. The Secretary may accept a repayment agreement instead of proceeding by offset. In making this determination, the Secretary will balance the Department's interest in collecting the debt against hardship to the employee. If