

## **DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES**

**HUMAN RESOURCES POLICY NO.: 7**

**EFFECTIVE DATE: JULY 2, 2020**

**SUBJECT: EDUCATIONAL LEAVE/REIMBURSEMENTS**

**AUTHORIZATION: THOMAS F. HARRIS, SECRETARY**

### **I. POLICY**

The Department of Natural Resources (DNR) fully supports and encourages its employees to further their training and education in fields related to their jobs and the mission of the department. Employees should not view educational leave or tuition/book fee reimbursements as a right or that such requests will be automatically approved. For these benefits to be granted, the public's interest must be furthered. Generally, this requires that the course taken enhance the employee's performance and improve the quality of service to the public.

### **II. PURPOSE**

This policy serves to establish criteria and a procedure for authorizing leave and reimbursements to employees for training and education, and imposes an obligation upon employees receiving such benefits to reimburse the costs therefor in the event they fail to remain employed by DNR.

### **III. APPLICABILITY**

This policy applies to all DNR employees who satisfy the eligibility requirements set forth herein.

### **IV. ELIGIBILITY**

#### **A. EMPLOYEE REQUIREMENTS**

Employees interested in educational leave and/or tuition/book fee reimbursements must apply for pre-approval prior to the beginning of the semester and meet the following eligibility requirements:

1. Have been continuously employed in a full-time position by DNR for a minimum of two (2) years;
2. Have achieved permanent status; and,
3. Have achieved PES ratings of "Successful" or "Exceptional" over the two (2) prior rating years.

## **B. TRAINING AND EDUCATION REQUIREMENTS**

In addition to the above employee requirements, the training and education for which the employee is requesting educational leave and/or tuition/book fee reimbursement must:

1. Be job-related such that completion of the coursework will materially assist the employee in performing customary job duties. Personal benefit to the employee is not the standard; rather, the training and education must further the business operations of the department;
2. Taken at an accredited institution of higher learning;
3. Directly paid for by the employee without the use of any grant funds, stipends, or the like from another source, if tuition/book fee reimbursements are requested; and,
4. Be completed with a grade of "B" or better in the course.

Approval of educational leave and/or tuition/book fee reimbursements must be obtained for each course taken. As such, employees must re-apply for such benefits prior to the beginning of each semester.

## **V. EDUCATIONAL LEAVE**

### **A. WORK SCHEDULE FLEXIBILITY**

Supervisors should exercise flexibility in fixing work schedules to permit employees to take advantage of available training and educational opportunities during off-duty hours. In recommending an employee be granted educational leave during work hours for this purpose, supervisors must remember that work responsibilities are a priority and take precedence over the individual needs of the employee.

### **B. LIMITATIONS**

Approval of educational leave is limited to the following:

1. Only when hours of class attendance conflict with the employee's normal work hours and the conflict cannot be resolved despite diligent effort; and,
2. Only for the hours of class attendance and related travel time to and from (up to 30 minutes each way) the educational institution; and,
3. Within the maximum allowable hours as follows:
  - a. A maximum of thirty calendar days (240 hours) in one calendar year for a qualifying course or courses; or,
  - b. A maximum of ninety calendar days (720 hours) in one calendar year if DNR requires an employee to undergo special training or education.

NOTE: Annual or compensatory leave may be granted to an employee to attend classes which require travel time to an educational institution beyond that allowed herein. Such approval will be granted only if the leave does not interfere with the employee's work activities or adversely impact the section's operations.

## **VI. TUITION/BOOK FEE REIMBURSEMENTS**

### **A. LIMITATIONS**

Approval of tuition/book fee reimbursements is limited to:

1. All, or a portion, of the actual costs incurred for required tuition and reasonable and necessary book fees;
2. Only authorized and pre-approved coursework that is job-related and directly benefits the department's operations; and,
3. Is dependent upon funding availability.

Under no circumstance will tuition/book fees be advanced or provided to an employee prior to successful completion of the course.

### **B. TAXABLE WAGES**

Under IRS regulations, any reimbursement for tuition/book fees in excess of \$5,250 per year is taxable and reported as income on the employee's W-2.

## **VII. PROCEDURES**

### **A. APPLYING FOR PRE-APPROVAL PRIOR TO COURSEWORK**

To apply for educational leave and/or seek tuition/book fee reimbursements:

1. The employee must complete the Reimbursement Agreement Form. All sections must be completed in full, including: Nature of the request (educational leave and/or reimbursement); Educational institution; Course(s) to be taken; Degree sought; Course days, times and duration; and, Detailed explanation of benefit to DNR resulting from completion of the course(s). If seeking educational leave, the request must identify the times of departure and return to work. If seeking reimbursement, the request must identify the total costs for tuition/book fees. Upon completion, the employee digitally signs and emails the form to his/her supervisor.

2. The supervisor is to consider the job-relatedness of the request and the impact of the employee's absence from duty on the section's operations, if applicable. If recommended for approval, the supervisor digitally signs and emails to the Human Resources Director.
3. The Human Resources Director shall confirm eligibility of the employee and requested training/education. If any information is missing, the form may be returned to the employee for corrections. If eligible, the Human Resources Director digitally signs and emails the form to the Appointing Authority.
4. The Appointing Authority shall review, affix his/her determination (including any required revisions such as reduction to approved reimbursement amount), digitally signs and emails the form to the Secretary.
5. The Secretary shall evaluate the merits of the request, render a final determination, and digitally sign. Once signed, the form is emailed to Human Resources for processing and record retention. In turn, the employee shall be notified of the determination.

**B. UPON COMPLETION OF TRAINING/EDUCATION**

Upon conclusion of the pre-approved coursework, the employee shall provide the following documentation to the Human Resources Director:

For Tuition/Book Fee Reimbursements	For Educational Leave
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Satisfactory completion of the course with a grade of "B" or better;</li> <li>2. Original receipts identifying the cost of tuition/books; and,</li> <li>3. Proof of payment of the tuition/book fees.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Satisfactory completion of the course with a grade of "B" or better; and,</li> <li>2. If requested, proof of class attendance to support the educational leave granted.</li> </ol>

Upon receipt, the Human Resources Director shall verify compliance of the submitted documentation and process as follows:

For Tuition/Book Fee Reimbursements	For Educational Leave
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If compliant, reimbursement will be entered into the payroll system with notice to the employee of the anticipated reimbursement check date.</li> <li>• If non-compliant, the employee shall be notified that he/she will not be reimbursed for the course.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If compliant, no further action is required.</li> <li>• If non-compliant, any time entries coded as educational leave shall be retroactively coded to the employee's accrued compensatory and/or annual leave balances.</li> </ul>

**VIII. EMPLOYEE REIMBURSEMENT OBLIGATION**

Given the limitations by express law upon the expenditure of public funds only in furtherance of public interests, DNR requires that an employee receiving the benefit of educational leave and/or tuition/book fee reimbursements commit, by contractual agreement, to continue working for DNR for a period of two (2) years following course completion. Continued employment for this period ensures that the State derives a benefit from the training/education provided to the employee. In the event the employee fails to satisfy this two-year commitment, he/she is required to reimburse the value of the educational leave and/or tuition and book fee reimbursements provided by the department.

**IX. EXCEPTIONS**

Exceptions to this policy may only be made by the Secretary and then only for reasons beneficial to the business operations of DNR.

**X. QUESTIONS**

Questions regarding this policy should be addressed to the Human Resources Division.

**THOMAS F. HARRIS, SECRETARY**

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**INITIAL ISSUE DATE: 02/15; 07/20**