

§ 15f.9 What will the Director do to settle my Section 741 Complaint Request when it is received?

The Director will review each Section 741 Complaint Request. If the Director finds that your complaint is an eligible complaint, the Director will: review all documents and evidence submitted by you; review all agency or CR files, if any exist, regarding the circumstances surrounding the alleged discrimination; review any damage claims; and seek any further clarification, if necessary, from either you or the agency. CR also may refer your eligible complaint for a formal investigation by the CR Program Investigation Division or by an outside contractor. Based on his or her review, the Director will either undertake negotiations with you to resolve the complaint; or inform you that CR will not settle the complaint and explain to you your options, including your right to request formal proceedings before an ALJ under subpart D of this part within 30 days of receipt of notice from the Director that CR will not settle the complaint. If the complaint is successfully resolved or settled, the Director will issue a final determination disposing of the matter. If you have received a notice that the Director will not settle the complaint prior to February 14, 2003, you have until 90 days after February 14, 2003 to request formal proceedings under subpart D of this part. Any request for formal proceedings received by USDA after the deadlines set forth in this section will not be accepted.

[68 FR 7412, Feb. 14, 2003]

§ 15f.10 What if I do not want the Director to review my Section 741 Complaint Request and I want to proceed directly to a hearing?

If you do not want the Director to review your Section 741 Complaint Request, you may request a hearing following the procedures below in subpart D. You may request a hearing at any time during informal review or negotiations with the Director, or at any time during USDA consideration of your Section 741 Complaint Request.

Subpart D—If I Request a Hearing, What Will Happen? How Will the Hearing Be Conducted?

§ 15f.11 Where must I file a hearing request and what happens to it?

If you desire a hearing, you must file a request for a hearing with the Docketing Clerk, citing the docket number assigned to your Section 741 Complaint Request. When the Docketing Clerk receives your request for a hearing, your Section 741 Complaint Request will be assigned to an ALJ. The Docketing Clerk will send a notice of your hearing request to OCR and the agency, notifying them of the docket number and the assigned ALJ. The Docketing Clerk also will send you a notice of receipt of the hearing request that will inform you of the name of the assigned ALJ.

§ 15f.12 Am I entitled to a hearing in all circumstances?

Under section 741, you have a right to a hearing as part of the process for USDA to render a final determination on your eligible complaint. However, if at any time the ALJ determines that your complaint is not an eligible complaint, he or she may dismiss your complaint with a final determination and USDA review of your complaint will then have been completed. You also are not entitled to a hearing if there are no material issues of fact in dispute between you and USDA. In other words, if the only dispute remaining is a question of law, you will not receive a hearing and the ALJ will make a final determination under § 15f.16.

§ 15f.13 What is the function of the ALJ and who may communicate with him?

(a) *What are the powers of the ALJ?*
The ALJ is responsible for conducting a hearing at your request on your Section 741 Complaint Request. He or she will have all powers prescribed in these rules and will make a proposed determination on your complaint. The proposed determination then will become the final determination after 35 days, unless the ASCR reviews the proposed determination.

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(b) *What is an ex parte communication?* An *ex parte* communication is a communication by one party to a proceeding with the ALJ outside of the presence of, or without notice to, the other parties to a proceeding. *Ex parte* communications in the proceedings on your complaint are prohibited and will be handled as follows:

(1) The ALJ will not engage in *ex parte* communications regarding the merits of a complaint with any party or with any person having any interest in the proceedings on the complaint, including OCR and any person in an advocacy or investigative capacity, at any time between the assignment of a hearing to him or her and the issuance of a proposed determination. This prohibition does not apply to:

(i) Discussions of procedural matters related to the complaint; or

(ii) Discussions of the merits of the complaint where all parties to the proceeding on the complaint have been given notice and an opportunity to participate.

(2) In the case of a communication described in paragraph (b)(1)(ii) of this section, a memorandum of any such discussion shall be included in the hearing record.

(3) No party to the proceeding or other interested person shall make or knowingly cause to be made to the ALJ an *ex parte* communication relevant to the merits of the complaint.

(4) If the ALJ receives an *ex parte* communication in violation of this section, the ALJ will place in the written record:

(i) All such written communications;

(ii) Memoranda stating the substance of all such oral communications; and

(iii) All written responses to such communications, and memoranda stating the substance of any oral responses to such communications.

(c) Upon receipt of a communication knowingly made or knowingly caused to be made by a party in violation of this section the ALJ may, to the extent consistent with the interests of justice and the policy underlying these proceedings, require the party or other interested person making the communication to show cause why such party's claim or interest in the complaint should not be dismissed, denied, dis-

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regarded, or otherwise adversely affected on account of such violation.

[63 FR 67394, Dec. 4, 1998, as amended at 68 FR 27449, May 20, 2003]

§ 15f.14 What happens after I file a request for a hearing?

Within 20 days after you have filed your request for a hearing, ALJ shall file with the Docketing Clerk a notice stating the time, place, and manner of the hearing. The ALJ will have due regard for the public interest and the convenience and necessity of the parties in determining the time, place, and manner of the hearing. The notice will state whether the hearing will be conducted by telephone, audiovisual telecommunication, or personal attendance of any individual expected to participate in the hearing. The Docketing Clerk will send copies of the notice to the complainant and to all other parties to the proceeding.

§ 15f.15 What happens after the Docketing Clerk notifies all parties?

The first step in this process involves a response to your hearing request by OCR. OCR will turn over its entire file on your complaint to the ALJ. OCR also will file a report with the ALJ stating its position with respect to whether or not your complaint is an eligible complaint, with reasons for its position, as well as stating its position with respect to the merits of your complaint. OCR must turn over its file and make its report on its position on your complaint within 35 days. OCR must provide a copy to you of anything it provides to the ALJ.

§ 15f.16 Although I request a hearing, may I request the ALJ to issue a decision without a hearing?

(a) At any time after the parties have been notified of your hearing request, you may file a request with the ALJ to make a determination based on the written record. With your request, you should file any other arguments or evidence that you wish the ALJ to consider. The agency and OCR will have 35 days after you file your request to file any additional information, arguments, or evidence for the consideration of the ALJ. The ALJ may recommend dismissal of your complaint