

# DETERIORATING PAY FOR PERFORMANCE ADVERSELY IMPACTING MORALE AND RETENTION WITHIN THE FEDERAL CAREER SENIOR EXECUTIVES AND PROFESSIONALS CORPS

Report by the Senior Executives Association Based On A  
Government-Wide Survey of SEA Members' Views Of Their  
Agencies' FY 2013 SES And SP Performance  
Appraisal Process And Outcomes



**May 2014**

## Senior Executives Association

SEA is a non-profit, non-partisan professional association that has served as the voice of the career federal executive corps since 1980. SEA's mission is to improve the efficiency, effectiveness, and productivity of the federal government; to advance the professionalism and advocate the interests of career federal executives; and to enhance public recognition of their accomplishments. For additional information about SEA, visit [www.seniorexecs.org](http://www.seniorexecs.org).

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Based on a Government-wide Survey of SEA Members' Views of Their Agencies' FY 2013 SES and SP Performance Appraisal Process and Outcomes

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# Introduction

During the week of February 13, 2014, the Senior Executives Association (SEA) conducted a survey of its members currently working in the federal government in career Senior Executive Service (SES), Senior Professional (SP) and equivalent level positions. The purpose of the survey was to determine the extent to which federal agencies had completed Fiscal Year 2013 performance appraisal and related processes for their Senior Executive and Professional employees (including issuing final ratings, granting performance awards and making pay adjustments) and to gauge the views of SES and SP employees on the timeliness, effectiveness and fairness of agencies' performance management systems. The survey also invited respondents to offer ideas to SEA on things the Association should do to help improve SES and SP performance management processes and outcomes in the federal government. Respondents were also asked to rate overall morale among career senior executives and professionals in their agency. (See Appendix A for a copy of SEA's survey instrument).

Almost 400 SEA members from across the government completed and returned the survey. Ninety percent of survey respondents were career SES, 7 percent were SP (comprised of Senior Level (SL) and Scientific or Professional (ST) employees) and 3 percent were other equivalent executive and professional level employees in defense intelligence, excepted service, and other positions. Among agencies with the largest number of survey respondents were the departments of Agriculture, Defense, Commerce, Energy, Homeland Security, Health and Human Services, Interior, Justice, Transportation, Treasury, and Veterans Affairs. In addition to answering pre-formatted survey questions, respondents, in many cases, provided written comments highlighting their suggestions and concerns in several different areas. Taken together, over 350 written comments were offered, many of which offered rich insights into current challenges in maintaining executive pay for performance as well as the state of morale of Senior Executive and Professional employees.

# Executive Summary

Compensation for members of the career Senior Executive Service and more recently Senior Professional employees is deeply grounded in the notion of pay for performance. Unlike employees in lower level General Schedule (GS) positions, SES and SP employees do not receive annual cost of living pay increases, longevity-based pay increases, locality pay or overtime pay. Instead, base pay increases as well as cash bonuses (i.e., performance awards) for SES and SP employees are performance-driven, deriving from annual ratings of executives' performance following rigorous reviews within their agencies. A cornerstone of the philosophy underpinning pay for performance is to reward excellence and achievement. However, in today's climate there are no guarantees that SES and SP employees will receive either annual upward pay adjustments or cash bonuses, even when their performance is highly rated.

Restrictions on pay adjustments and performance awards are due to a variety of factors, not the least of which have been government-wide pay freezes, reductions in funding pools for performance awards mandated by the Administration, budget constraints within some agencies limiting funds available for awards and pay adjustments, and other factors. Taken together, and as evidenced by the results of this survey, these factors are seriously eroding the operation of pay for performance for Senior Executives and Professionals. The decline of pay for performance operates to magnify the encroaching pay compression between Senior Executives and the GS employees they supervise – and is resulting, in an increasing number of cases, in GS employees making as much, if not more, in total compensation (base pay plus performance bonuses) than their SES and SP supervisors. Given the challenges and risks involved in Senior Executive and Professional jobs, many survey respondents openly questioned whether continuing in their positions, as opposed to retiring or seeking employment in the private sector, is in their best interests – despite the satisfaction they derive from service to the public and the

*“I have received either Outstanding or Exceeded Expectations during my 7 year SES tenure; never had a pay raise and no bonuses for the last 3 years. I hope to leave federal employment very soon.”*

nation. Indeed, the marked increase in turnover rates among career SES and SP employees in recent years reflects a growing frustration with the lack of pay for performance as well as the harsh political and budgetary climate that has made their jobs appreciably more difficult, notably riskier and much less rewarding.

Fair and effective performance management systems directly and positively impact both organizational and individual accomplishment. When these systems are perceived as unfair, inconsequential, overly burdensome and devoid of material relevance, they become negatives in the realm of motivating and engaging employees, including Senior Executives and Professionals. In some cases, they are seen as little more than administrative exercises, or as some survey respondents described them, “check the box” activities.

Timeliness is also important. Although most employees reported having received final performance ratings for FY 2013 at the time of SEA's survey, almost one quarter had not – over four months into FY 2014. Some major agencies, such as the Department of Veterans Affairs

and the Department of the Interior, were reported to have only finalized small percentages of FY 2013 SES performance ratings. Lack of timeliness in finalizing the appraisal process and actions flowing from it undermine effective performance planning management and detract from meaningful employee recognition. Several factors contributed to delays in the FY 2013 performance appraisal process for Senior executives and Professionals, not the least of which was agencies' having to wait until well after the close of the fiscal year for guidance from OPM and OMB governing funding pools for performance awards as well as final guidance on making pay adjustments pursuant to an Executive Order lifting of the pay cap for SES and SP salaries. However, agencies themselves contributed to delays in many cases through slow and uneven performance feedback, review, rating, and oversight processes.

*“No feedback at all. Rather disheartening considering high expectations for results and ongoing scrutiny and criticism against SES. Era of more disincentives to want to join or stay.”*

*“Very dissatisfied. Takes an absurd length of time because of one or two political employees delaying their performance ratings and the inability of the PRB to meet and make a decision in advance of detailed guidance from either OMB or OPM. Should not take 4-6 months for the performance management cycle to close out each year. ”*

morale as “high or very high.” Moreover, over a third (34%) reported being “not satisfied” with their agencies' FY 2013 performance appraisal and rating processes, with more than twice as many opining that their agencies' FY 2013 process was not as good as the FY 2012 process (as opposed to FY 2013 being better than FY 2012).

Taken together, the results of SEA's survey evidence high degrees of frustration and dissatisfaction with many aspects of the current state of performance management within the federal sector, especially those related to the pay for performance tenets underlying compensation and recognition systems for the career executive corps. A majority (51%) of survey respondents rated overall morale among Senior Executives and Professionals at their agencies as “low or very low” with only 13% rating overall

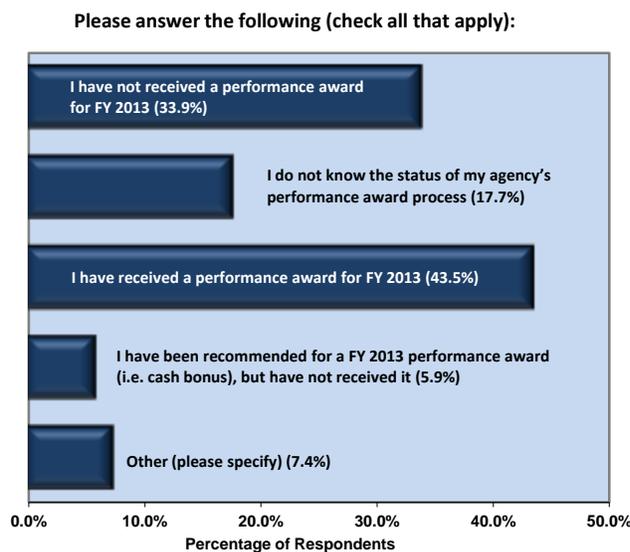
# Key Findings

Although results vary by agency (see Appendix B for comparison of major agencies), the following overarching findings highlight both relevant numeric responses to key survey questions as well as respondents' written comments on questions seeking views on their level of satisfaction with performance appraisal processes and outcomes as well as their insights on the state of morale and motivation among federal career Senior Executives and Professionals in their agencies.

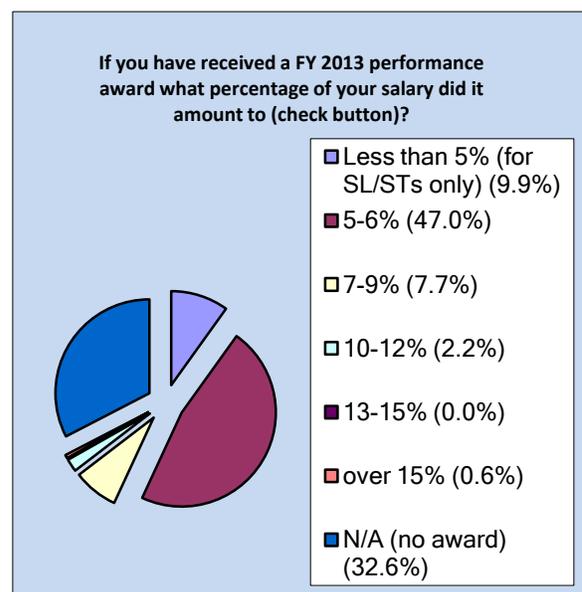
**Deteriorating pay for performance is unfair and causing significant morale problems:** Many executives, especially those in DoD agencies where the funding for performance awards was drastically reduced, expressed dismay at receiving high performance ratings and praise for their work but limited or no performance awards or performance-driven base pay adjustments. Many reported their agencies using quotas, making last minute adjustments to ratings, or rotating bonuses among executives as ways of limiting the number and/or amounts of performance awards and pay adjustments to meet budgetary constraints or create the impression of parity between SES and GS level employees. Some respondents reported receiving "time off" awards in lieu of pay for performance, a gesture most found meaningless given their highly demanding workloads and current "use or lose" annual leave status.

Many respondents reported their GS 15 and 14 subordinates fared much better from a pay for performance standpoint than they did, leading many to conclude there are virtually no financial incentives left for serving in highly demanding SES and SP positions. Numerous respondents reported being very frustrated and demoralized by the absence of pay for performance and long-running pay limitations, with many indicating they planned to retire in the near future. Survey results indicate that the percentage of SES and SP employees receiving awards and the size of those awards is limited.

## Receipt of Performance Award



## Size of Performance Award



Written comments reflective of frustrations expressed by survey respondents include the following:

*“There is not a company in the world that would institute pay freezes, deny or limit performance bonuses, continually criticize senior executives, politicize mistakes by agencies and blow them all out of proportion and at the same time expect us to work long hours, recruit top talent and continue to be positive about the future of government.”*

*“Quotas are used; scores are lowered....totally demoralizing and slaps the SES members who devote so much of themselves to the Department. The minimal savings from the bonus pool reduction will cost way more in lowered morale and departures. Very short-sighted.”*

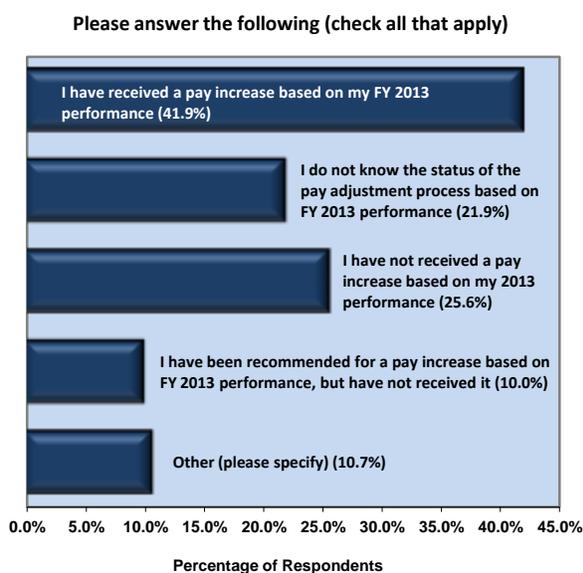
*“I have not had a pay adjustment nor bonus for 3 years even though rated Exceeded for the two preceding years and promoted to a new position with a higher level of authority. The SES pay system is broken.”*

*“It is unacceptable to deny bonuses to employees rated as outstanding.”*

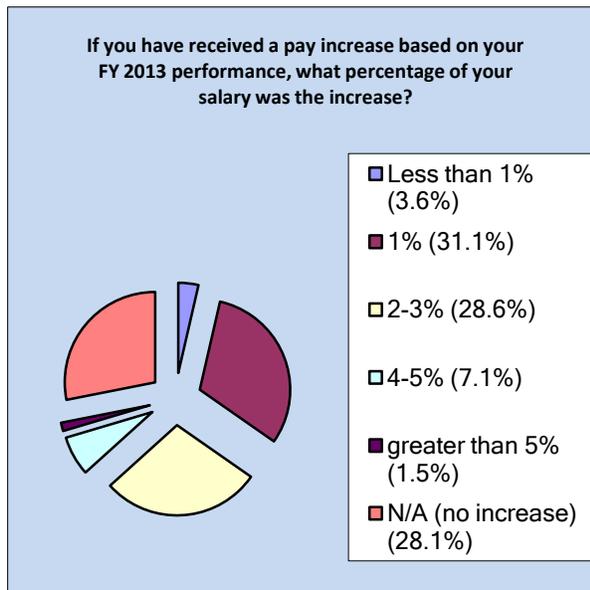
*“Extremely DISSATISFIED! I was put in for a 5 rating and the Senior SES knocked it back to a 4 because he did not have enough 5 ratings to go around. I am tired of working in a pay for performance system that does not pay for performance.”*

**Pay Compression is getting out of hand and threatens SES and SP retention:** A large number of commenters cited accelerating pay compression between SES/SPs and their GS-15 subordinates as being patently unfair, a source of rising frustration, a growing threat to retention and a major factor in discouraging high-performing GS 15s and 14s from actively seeking senior executive positions in their agencies. Many of these respondents pointed out that SES and SPs seemed to be in the worst of both worlds – diminishing pay for performance coupled with not being eligible for cost of living adjustments, locality pay increases, or compensatory time. Survey data bearing on the percentage and size of pay increases for SES and SP employees indicate many of these individuals, unlike GS employees at their agencies, did not receive pay increases.

### Receipt of Pay Adjustment



### Size of Pay Adjustment



Respondents provided many comments expressing frustration with pay compression and other compensation shortcomings of being in Senior Executive and Professional positions, including the following:

*“Senior executives should at least have parity with 15s in their ability to receive pay increases and/or bonuses. Many of my GS-15 employees make more money (pay plus bonus) than I do despite having been a senior executive for 14 years...”*

*“Today, there appears little benefit yet a significantly more burdensome role for SES professionals. Many wonder aloud, why do we do this? I should just go back to being a GS-15 and have a better work life balance with less hassle.”*

*“My best colleagues are retiring in disgust, and the best 15’s don’t see a reason to go into the SES. The pay overlap between SES and GS-15 will be complete soon.”*

**Lack of respect and appreciation for career executives is hurting morale and agency performance:**

Many respondents expressed deep disappointment in what they perceived as the current Administration’s (and Congress’) lack of respect and/or appreciation for their roles and the work they do. In some cases they reported feeling marginalized, not trusted/supported or overlooked in policy formulation and agency leadership processes by the political appointees to whom they report. Sensing they are not really part of the Administration’s team was reported as causing problems, both with morale as well as programmatic outcomes, by some respondents. Written comments in this area included:

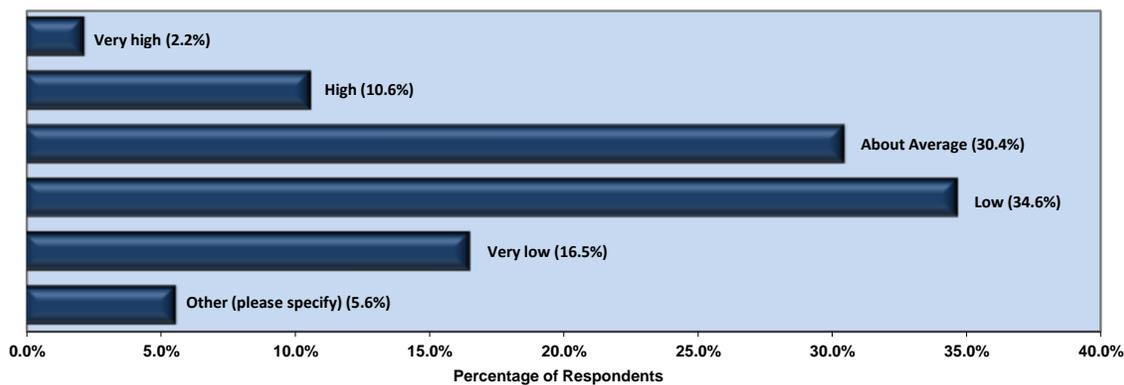
*“My experience with this Administration is a complete lack of respect or engagement with SES employees. No interaction or seeking of advice. This is across the Department, not limited to just my bureau. The lack of respect is completely undermining my ability to be a champion or carry the flag for any of this Administration’s initiatives.”*

*“Political appointees show zero respect for career senior executives in the agency ... not just me, but all regional directors share the same observation.”*

*“In my opinion, after serving six years as an SES, it appears to me that no one in a position of power really cares at all about having any positive impact concerning the civilian workforce ... no political leader really cares.”*

**Overall Morale Breakdown**

Generally speaking, how would you rate morale among career Senior Executives and Professionals at your agency at this time (check appropriate button)?



**SES performance appraisal processes seen as slow, burdensome and not transparent:** Numerous commenters expressed frustration and anger with the slowness and lack of transparency in their agencies’ performance appraisal and rewards processes. On a macro level this was evidenced by one fourth of all respondents reporting they had not even received a performance rating for FY 2013 at the time of the survey (mid-February 2014). Further, many respondents commented on how much work and re-work is attached to their agencies’ processes and how new requirements are often added throughout the performance appraisal cycle.

Others commented on the lack of information or transparency by OPM, OMB and their agencies regarding funding for awards, timing of ratings and review of ratings, final decisions on ratings and pay-outs. Some commented on a perceived lack of accountability or ownership within their agencies for the overall performance management system. Some pointed out the irony of their agencies' having highly complex and work intensive performance appraisal systems that result in little or no pay-off for career executives who dutifully maintain them. Written comments on these subjects include:

*"Very dissatisfied with the process. Takes an absurd amount of time and is a closed door process. Needs to be transparent. ERB/PRB should penalize supervisors – including politicals who fail to establish performance plans ... or fail to complete the submission of their performance appraisals. There is NO accountability for either event not taking place. Its February 12<sup>th</sup> and I still don't have a performance plan for FY 2014 despite four attempts to get one."*

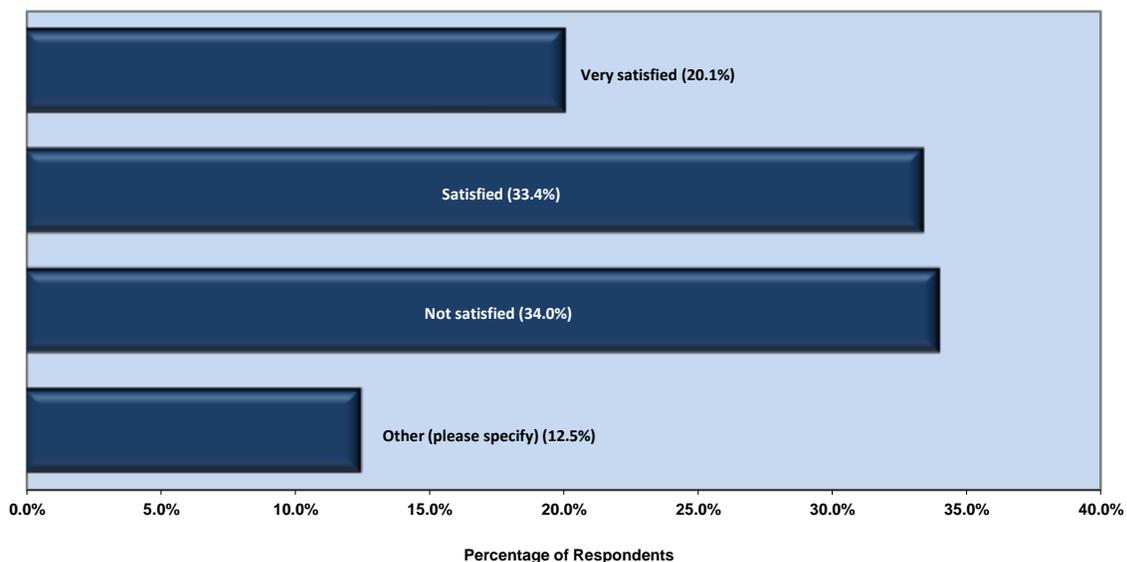
*"Shouldn't have to wait until the end of the process to find out that even with receiving the highest appraisal (rating), no cash bonus will be given. Still not clear on how much pay raise will be given and when. We (SES) are not treated with the same level of information and courtesy that other government employees are provided."*

*"Process completely unsatisfactory. No feedback. No rating. Performance plan never completed. Work on establishing a plan started in May. My organization reports to two SES (one political and one career – and both had different agendas). Impossible!"*

*"As an SES, I would be fired if I managed my employees the way I am being managed as far as timeliness of rating decisions."*

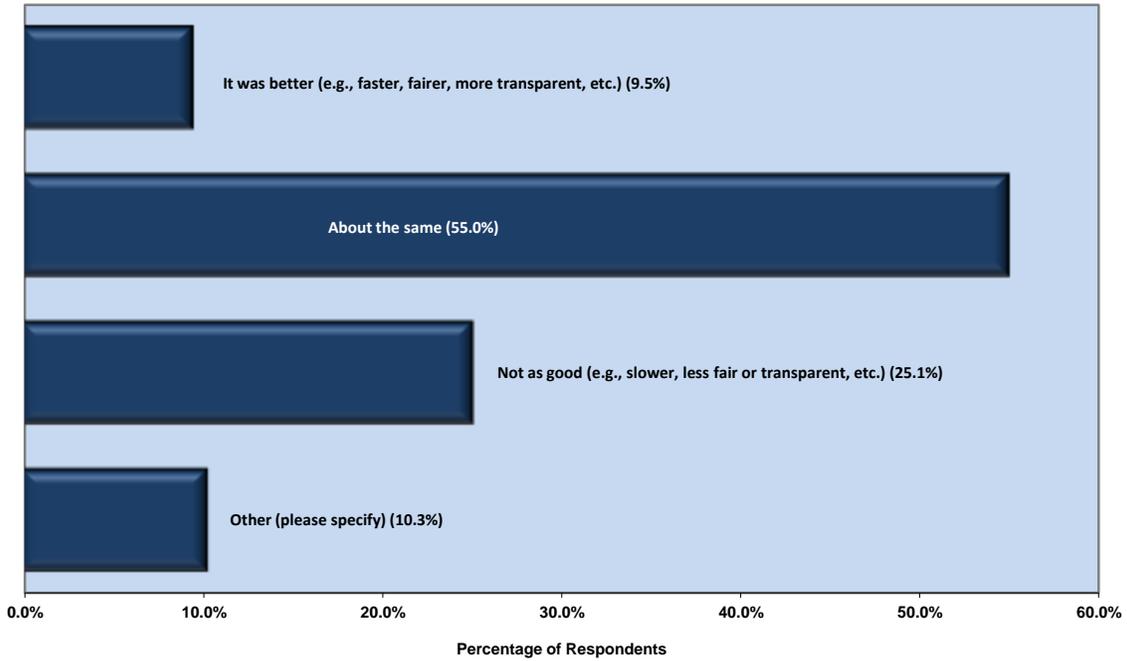
### **Overall Satisfaction with Agency Performance Appraisal Processes and Outcomes**

Overall, how satisfied were you with your agency's FY 2013 performance appraisal and rating process (check appropriate button)?



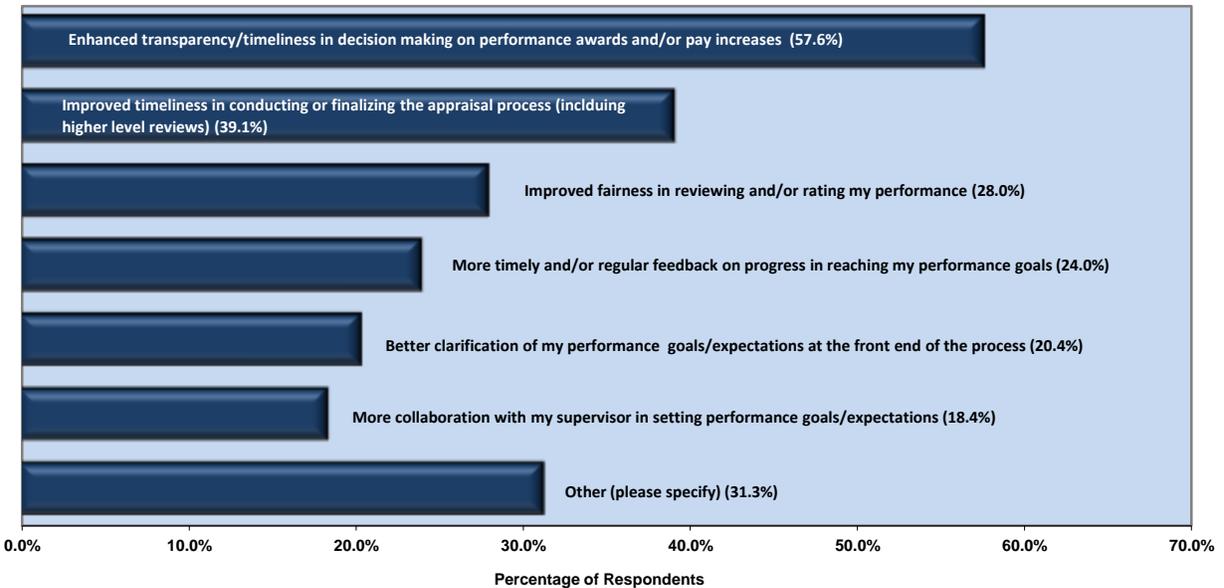
### FY 2013 vs. FY 2012 Views on Process

How did your agency's FY 2013 performance management process compare with your prior years' experience (check appropriate button)



### Ranking of top recommended improvements needed in agency PA processes

What improvements would you recommend, if any, to your agency's process (check all that apply)



### **SEA seen as a force for positive change and for protecting career SES and SPs from further denigration:**

In responding to the survey question asking what SEA should be doing or focusing on to help improve performance management processes and/or outcomes for senior executives and professionals, numerous comments were offered spanning a wide range. Many respondents thanked SEA for its past efforts in being a proactive, vigilant advocate for the career corps, including the Association's efforts in dealing with the Administration and Congress as well as other good government groups on issues such as the STOCK Act and recognition for Presidential Rank awardees. Some warned that SEA needs to try to do a good deal more to create a level playing field given the pernicious atmosphere in Congress and lack of interest and support within the Administration for recognizing and rewarding high performing career executives. Many others offered suggestions for future SEA efforts, with many urging aggressive advocacy and other actions as needed in the following major areas:

- *Fix the SES/SP pay systems so that executives are paid at levels above those who they supervise, including the restoration of locality pay*
- *Restore true pay for performance through adequate funding for cash awards and pay adjustments*
- *Reinstate the original, fully funded and supported Presidential Rank Awards program*
- *Publicize and promote the vital, effective work done by senior executives in service to the nation*
- *Educate Congress on the SES system of risks and rewards as well as the hard work and dedication of those who serve*
- *Impress upon the Administration the high costs of flagging morale and increased turnover among executives*
- *Push for more data, transparency, communication and fairness within the Administration on performance management systems and processes for SES and SPs*
- *Help encourage and prepare the next generation of SES and SPs, especially in light of all the negatives causing increased turnover among current executives*

## Conclusions and Next Steps

The results of the survey are of great concern to SEA from several standpoints.

- First, major delays in finalizing FY 2013 performance appraisal and recognition processes created damaging uncertainty and frustration among career executives at a time when their jobs were already very demanding due to sequester and constrained budget and personnel resources.
- Second, the outcomes of the FY 2013 process reflect further deterioration of pay for performance for career senior executives – underscoring the need to reexamine the government-wide system for compensating SES and SP employees at a time when retirements and other turnover are increasing in the ranks and there is mounting evidence that high performing GS-15s and other potential replacement candidates are shunning SES opportunities.
- Third, a majority of survey respondents reported low morale among senior executives and professionals at their agencies – an especially alarming finding given that these groups have been among the most positive in their outlook in former government-wide employee surveys over the years.

Importantly, the overall portrait of today's career executive workforce reflects a shifting landscape of risk and rewards – one that has threatening implications for talent maintenance within the ranks as well as the ability to continue to effectively manage large-scale, highly complex federal programs. This imbalance is at odds with the carefully construed framework of the Civil Service Reform Act and follow on legislation, which recognized that career executives, in exchange for heightened risk of ease of removal from their positions and lack of any pay increases except for those based on performance, deserve the opportunity to be meaningfully compensated and recognized for outstanding accomplishments. The beneficiaries of a properly balanced system are not only executives themselves, but government as a whole that benefits from their innovation, creativity and dedicated service to the nation. Unfortunately, this balance has eroded to a point where low morale, growing turnover, and increasingly dysfunctional human resources policies and practices are jeopardizing the administration of important agency programs and national goals. In assessing overall survey findings SEA strongly:

- Urges the Administration to reverse policies, such as suspension of Presidential Rank Awards and reduction in funding pools for SES performance awards, which are contributing to the deterioration of pay for performance and the loss of talent in the senior executive and professional corps.

- Calls upon Administration and Congress to work with the Association and other good government groups on meaningful legislative and regulatory reforms of the senior executive system to restore fairness, effectiveness and integrity to laws governing pay, performance, hiring, development, utilization and motivation of the federal government’s mission critical career executive workforce.

In conclusion, SEA believes the insights gained from survey responses should operate as a “wake-up call” to all stakeholders, including federal agencies where career executives are employed, to restore respect and support for the men and women in SES and SP positions who give so much of themselves for their government and the American people while asking very little in return - except to be treated fairly.

# Appendix A: Survey Instrument

## SURVEY OF SEA ACTIVE MEMBERS: FY 2013 PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT PROCESS

Responses to this survey are strictly confidential. Data collected will only be analyzed on a macro, non-personal level and at all times will remain under the exclusive control of SEA.

1. Please provide your current type of appointment/grade level (check appropriate button)

Senior Executive Service (SES)

Senior Level (SL)

Scientific or Professional (ST)

Other Equivalent Executive Appointment/Grade (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

2. Please specify your current federal agency (please select from the drop down box):

**Please provide the status of the rating of your FY 2013 performance.**

3. I have received a final rating of my FY 2013 performance. Yes  No

**If you answered "yes" to question 3, please skip question 4 and go to question 5 and complete the remainder of the survey. If you answered "no" to question 3, please complete question 4 and the remainder of the survey.**

4. **If you answered no to question 3**, what is the status of the rating of your FY 2013 performance (check all that apply)?

I expect it to be completed within the next month or two

I am contesting the initial rating assigned to me

I do not know if/when the rating process will be completed

Other (please explain): \_\_\_\_\_

5. If you answered yes to question 3, what was your FY 2013 performance rating (check appropriate button)?:

higher than my rating for the previous year

the same as my rating for the previous year

lower than my rating for the previous year

Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

6. What was your 2013 performance rating (check appropriate button)?:

Outstanding (or the highest rating possible in your agency's performance appraisal system)

Exceeds Expectations (or the 2<sup>nd</sup> highest rating level in your agency's 5 level system)

Fully Successful/ Meets Expectations

Minimally Satisfactory (or the level below fully successful and above unacceptable)

Unacceptable/Unsatisfactory (or the lowest rating possible in your agency's system)

Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

7. Please answer the following (check all that apply):

I have received a performance award for FY 2013

I have been recommended for a FY 2013 performance award (i.e., cash bonus), but have not received it

I have not received a performance award for FY 2013

I do not know the status of my agency's performance award process for FY 2013

Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

8. If you have received a FY 2013 performance award what percentage of your salary did it amount to (check button)?

(Less than 5% -for GS-15s, SL/STs only),  5-6%,  7-9%,  10-12%,  13-15%,  over 15%,  N/A (no award)

9. Please answer the following (check all that apply)

I have received a pay increase based on my FY 2013 performance

I have been recommended for a pay increase based on FY 2013 performance but have not received it

I have not received a pay increase based on my FY 2013 performance

I do not know the status of the pay adjustment process based on FY 2013 performance

Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

10. If you have received a pay increase based on your FY 2013 performance, what percentage of your salary was the increase?

Less than 1%,  1%,  2-3%,  4-5%,  greater than 5%,  N/A (no increase)

11. Overall, how satisfied were you with your agency's FY 2013 performance appraisal and rating process (check appropriate box)?

Very satisfied

Satisfied

Not satisfied

Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

12. What improvements would you recommend, if any, to your agency's process (check all that apply)

Better clarification of my performance goals/expectations at the front end of the process

More collaboration with my supervisor in setting performance goals/expectations

More timely and/or regular feedback on progress in reaching my performance goals

Improved fairness in reviewing and/or rating my performance

Improved timeliness in conducting or finalizing the appraisal process (including higher level reviews)

Enhanced transparency/timeliness in decision making on performance awards and/or pay increases

Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

13. How did your agency's FY 2013 performance management process compare with your prior years' experience (check appropriate button)

It was better (e.g., faster, fairer, more transparent, etc.)

About the same

Not as good (e.g., slower, less fair or transparent, etc.)

Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

14. Generally speaking, how would you rate morale among career senior executives and professionals at your agency at this time (check appropriate button)?

Very high

High

About Average

Low

Very Low

Other (please explain): \_\_\_\_\_

15. Can you think of anything SEA should be doing or focusing on (beyond our current efforts) to help improve performance management processes and/or outcomes for senior executives and professionals?

No

Yes (please explain): \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix B: Major Agency Comparison Table

**Major Agency Comparison Table\***

Agency	Satisfaction with Agency Appraisal Process				FY 2013 Appraisal Process versus FY 2012 Process				Overall Morale of Career SES/SPs within Agency					
	Very Satisfied	Satisfied	Not Satisfied	O	Better	Same	Worse	O	Very High	High	Average	Low	Very Low	O
<b>Agriculture</b>	44%	33	17	6	33	39	17	11	11	22	33	22	6	6
<b>Commerce</b>	33%	33	28	6	11	45	44	0	6	17	28	22	17	11
<b>DoD (OSD)</b>	11%	37	37	16	0	53	26	21	0	5	21	42	26	5
<b>Air Force</b>	6%	29	47	18	6	41	53	0	0	0	24	71	0	6
<b>Army</b>	26%	30	17	26	9	52	17	22	0	4	17	52	9	17
<b>Navy</b>	6%	22	61	11	6	39	50	6	0	0	11	50	33	6
<b>Energy</b>	38%	31	23	8	23	46	23	8	0	15	31	38	15	0
<b>HHS</b>	21%	29	36	14	7	79	14	0	7	14	50	29	0	0
<b>Homeland Security</b>	36%	52	8	4	16	76	8	0	4	12	60	16	8	0
<b>Interior</b>	14%	29	36	21	0	43	36	21	0	7	36	36	21	0
<b>Justice</b>	50%	36	14	0	0	86	7	7	0	36	50	14	0	0
<b>Labor</b>	30%	40	30	0	20	60	10	10	0	20	30	20	20	0
<b>Treasury</b>	13%	29	58	0	0	46	54	0	0	8	13	54	25	0
<b>Transportation</b>	13%	50	25	12	25	63	6	6	6	6	56	19	6	6
<b>VA</b>	0%	24	62	14	0	57	31	12	0	0	7	38	48	7
<b>Average of All Survey Respondents</b>	20%	33	34	13	10	55	25	10	2	11	30	35	16	6

\*These comparisons based on responses of SES and SP level SEA members to a survey administered by SEA in mid-February, 2014

Code: "O" = Other

All numbers used in the table represent percentages, e.g., 30 = 30%



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