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MEMORANDUM NO. 213

TO: ALL CONTRACTING AGENCIES OF THE FEDERAL
GOVERNMENT AND THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

FROM: 
MARY BETH MAXWELL
Acting Deputy Administrator

SUBJECT: Application of the Davis-Bacon and Related Acts requirement that wage rates for additional classifications, when "conformed" to an existing wage determination, bear a "reasonable relationship" to the wage rates in that wage determination

This Memorandum is notification from the Department of Labor's Wage and Hour Division (WHD) of the proper application of the Davis-Bacon and Related Acts (DBRA) requirements for wage rates for additional classifications that are "conformed" to an existing wage determination by agency contracting officers. The regulations at 29 C.F.R. § 5.5(a)(1)(ii)(A) provide that contracting officers shall approve an additional classification and its proposed wage rate in conformance with an existing wage determination only when the work to be performed by the proposed classification is not performed by a classification in the wage determination and the proposed wage rate bears a "reasonable relationship" to the wages rates in the wage determination. Although this Memorandum primarily focuses on the "reasonable relationship" requirement, it is essential at the threshold to reiterate that a conformance is not appropriate when the work of the proposed classification is already performed by a classification on the wage determination. The conformance process is narrow in scope and has the limited purpose of establishing a new classification when it is necessary to do so because work needed to perform the contract is not performed by an existing classification. *See Cambridge Plaza*, ARB Case No. 07-102 (ARB Oct. 29, 2009). Accordingly, the WHD will not add a new classification through a conformance action unless the first criterion for issuance of a conformance is satisfied, i.e., the proposed work in question is not performed by any classification in the existing wage determination. 29 C.F.R. § 5.5(a)(1)(ii)(A)(1).

In those circumstances in which the duties of the proposed classification are not performed by any classification in the existing wage determination, the WHD will consider whether the proposed wage rate bears a "reasonable relationship" to the wage rates in the wage determination. In the past, WHD has generally approved proposed wage rates for a conformed skilled craft and a power equipment operator when such rates were not less than the rate for the lowest classification in the respective category on the contract wage determination. The practice of using the lowest rate in the relevant category as a benchmark also occurred on occasion with laborers and truck drivers. In keeping with the remedial purpose of the DBRA and the governing

regulations, the wage rate of the lowest skilled craft, laborer, power equipment operator, or truck driver classification on the contract wage determination has no longer been an automatic benchmark when reviewing conformance requests. WHD's approach of not using the lowest wage rate as a benchmark has been progressively implemented over the last year.

The Conformance Process

In accordance with 29 C.F.R. § 5.5(a)(1)(ii)(A), the contracting officer shall require that any class of laborers or mechanics which is not listed in the wage determination and which is to be employed under the contract shall be classified in conformance with the wage determination. The contracting officer shall approve an additional classification and a wage rate (including fringe benefits) for the classification only when the following criteria have been met:

- (1) The work to be performed by the classification requested is not performed by a classification in the wage determination; and
- (2) The classification is utilized in the area by the construction industry; and
- (3) The proposed wage rate, including any bona fide fringe benefits, bears a reasonable relationship to the wage rates contained in the wage determination.

Further, if the contractor, the laborers or mechanics (if known) to be employed in the classification or their representatives, and the contracting agency agree on the classification and wage rate proposed, a report of the action taken is sent by the contracting officer to the Administrator of WHD for approval, denial, or modification. The Administrator (or an authorized representative) shall respond within 30 days of receipt, or the contracting officer will be notified that more time is necessary. *See* 29 C.F.R. § 5.5(a)(1)(ii)(B). In the event that the contractor, the laborers or mechanics (if known) to be employed in the classification or their representatives, and the contracting agency do not agree on the classification and wage rate proposed, the contracting officer shall refer the questions, including the views of all interested parties and the recommendation of the contracting officer, to the Administrator of WHD for determination. The Administrator (or an authorized representative) shall issue a determination within 30 days of receipt and so advise the contracting officer, or the contracting officer will be notified that more time is necessary. *See* 29 C.F.R. § 5.5(a)(1)(ii)(C).

"Reasonable Relationship"

WHD previously typically approved conformance requests from contracting officers for wage rates (including fringe benefits) for skilled classifications and power equipment operators by automatically using as a benchmark the lowest rate for a skilled classification or power equipment operator, respectively, in the applicable wage determination. The practice of using the lowest rate in the relevant category as a benchmark also occurred on occasion with laborers and truck drivers. WHD has concluded, however, that it better reflects the regulatory requirement that "the proposed wage rate, including any bona fide fringe benefits, bears a reasonable relationship to the wage rates contained in the wage determination" to consider the entirety of the rates within the relevant category on the wage determination and to not generally use as a benchmark the lowest rate within that category. The regulation at 29 C.F.R. §

5.5(a)(1)(ii)(A)(3) requires that the proposed wage rate bear a reasonable relationship to the “wage rates” on the wage determination and not to a particular rate or the lowest rate.

The category in which the requested additional classification falls is relevant to the reasonable relationship analysis. As background, classifications in wage determinations fall into four general categories: skilled crafts, laborers, power equipment operators, and truck drivers. To determine a “reasonable relationship,” the requested additional classification is compared to the classifications on the applicable wage determination within the same category. A proposed skilled craft classification is compared to skilled classifications in the wage determination; a proposed laborer classification is compared to existing laborer classifications; a proposed power equipment operator classification is compared to existing power equipment operator classifications; and a proposed truck driver classification is compared to existing truck driver classifications. See *Mistick Construction*, ARB Case No. 02-004 (June 24, 2003); *Tower Construction*, WAB Case No. 94-17 (Feb. 28, 1995).¹ Thus, when considering a conformance request for a skilled classification, WHD generally considers the entirety of the rates for the skilled classifications on the applicable wage determination and looks to where the proposed wage rate falls within the rates listed on the wage determination. Occasionally, however, a wage determination may contain some wage rates for laborer classifications that are higher than some wage rates for the skilled classifications or power equipment operators (likely because the laborers’ rates reflect union prevailing rates and the skilled crafts’ or power equipment operators’ rates reflect weighted average prevailing rates). On such occasions, the contracting officer should look to those skilled classifications whose rates are higher than the laborer classifications’ rates. See *M.Z. Contractors Co.*, WAB Case No. 92-06 (Aug. 25, 1992). If, however, most of the skilled classifications’ or power equipment operators’ rates are lower than the laborer classifications’ rates, then it may be reasonable to propose a rate that reflects the skilled classifications’ rates even if they are lower than the laborer classifications’ rates.

Additionally, whether the wage rates in the applicable category (skilled craft, laborer, power equipment operator, truck driver) in the wage determination are predominantly union prevailing wage rates or predominantly weighted average prevailing wage rates should be considered when proposing rates for an additional classification. For example, if a wage determination contains predominantly union prevailing wage rates for skilled classifications, it typically would be appropriate to look to the union sector skilled classifications in the wage determination and the rates for those classifications when proposing a wage rate for the additional classification. Conversely, if a wage determination contains predominantly weighted average prevailing wage rates for skilled classifications, it typically would be appropriate to look to the weighted average/non-union sector skilled classifications in the wage determination and the rates for those classifications when proposing a wage rate for the additional classification. If the wage rates in the applicable category are roughly half union prevailing rates and half weighted average prevailing rates, it would typically be appropriate to look to the lowest union rate and the highest weighted average rate (assuming the union rates are higher than the weighted average rates) when proposing a wage rate.

¹ Copies of Administrative Review Board (ARB) and Wage Appeals Board (WAB) decisions can be obtained from: www.oalj.dol.gov/libdba.htm.

While the majority of conformance requests are within the skilled classification category, the governing regulations and the principles outlined in this Memorandum apply to the other categories of workers – laborers, power equipment operators, and truck drivers. To meet the “reasonable relationship” test for a conformed power equipment operator or truck driver classification, the proposed wage rate should bear a reasonable relationship to the entirety of rates within the respective classification, and in particular to the union or weighted average rates in the classification (assuming union or weighted average rates prevail for the classification). When a conformance for a laborer classification is requested, WHD generally continues to use the common laborer rate already existing in the wage determination as a benchmark for the proposed rate.

Each conformance request and corresponding wage determination involves particular circumstances and therefore should be evaluated as such. The full range of wage rates on the wage determination for the appropriate category should be reviewed in the manner discussed above. When seeking conformed classifications and wage rates, the contractor and the contracting officer should not rely on a wage determination or conformance granted to another party regardless of the similarity of the work in question. *See, e.g., Inland Waters Pollution Control, Inc.*, WAB Case No. 94-12 (Sept. 30, 1994). Moreover, the contractor and the contracting officer should not prospectively rely on WHD’s prior approval of rates for application to a contract performed at the same location. *See E&M Sales, Inc.*, WAB Case No. 91-17 (Oct. 4, 1991). Although atypical, use of the “lowest skilled” rate may of course be appropriate when that rate in fact bears a reasonable relationship to the wage rates contained in the wage determination for the appropriate category. *See, e.g., Tower Construction*, WAB Case No. 94-17 (Feb. 28, 1995) (conformed wage rate, which equaled lowest skilled rate on wage determination, was reasonable).

In sum, contracting agencies should take the following steps when proposing a wage rate for a classification to be conformed to an existing wage determination:

- First, the contracting agency should determine the category (skilled crafts, laborers, power equipment operators, or truck drivers) of the classification which is being conformed.
- Second, the contracting agency should determine for that category whether union or weighted average/non-union sector rates prevail in the existing wage determination.
- Third, after reviewing the entirety of the rates within the appropriate sector in the applicable category, the contracting agency should determine a rate that bears a reasonable relationship to those rates on the wage determination.
- Fourth, the contracting agency should determine whether any of the considerations identified in this Memorandum apply (or whether any other relevant considerations apply). For example, if the classification being conformed is a skilled classification and some of the wage rates for skilled classifications in the wage determination are lower than the rates for laborer classifications, then the contracting agency should use those existing skilled classification rates that are higher than the laborer rates to determine the

proposed rate. And if the classification which is being conformed is a laborer classification, the proposed wage rate should generally use the existing common laborer wage rate as a benchmark.

Conclusion

The WHD Administrator has historically maintained broad discretion under the regulations to make determinations regarding proposed wage rates for additional classifications that are conformed to existing wage determinations. This broad discretion has been confirmed by the ARB and its predecessors, as illustrated by the decisions cited in this Memorandum, among others. In exercising that discretion, WHD ensures that wage rates (including fringe benefits) for the classification to be conformed bear a reasonable relationship to the range of rates for the classifications in the wage determination in the same category (skilled classifications, power equipment operators, laborers, and truck drivers), and not automatically to the lowest rate in the applicable category. Consistent with the governing regulations, contracting agencies should ensure that they request wage rates (including fringe benefits) for additional classifications in accordance with the principles set forth in this Memorandum. By following the guidance in this AAM, contracting agencies and contractors will benefit by receiving approvals from WHD that ensure consistency in conformed wage rates and increase efficiencies in government.

In conjunction with the guidance provided in this AAM, WHD has posted on www.dol.gov/whd/govcontracts/dbra.htm a series of frequently asked questions that include examples which will provide additional guidance regarding the reasonable relationship requirement in the conformance process. WHD also is updating its Prevailing Wage Resource Book and will provide compliance assistance on DBRA conformances at future Prevailing Wage Conferences. In addition, WHD's Branch of Construction Wage Determinations is available to assist with any questions.