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Title 43 —Public Lands: Interior

Subtitle A —Office of the Secretary of the Interior

Part 4 —Department of the Interior Hearings and Appeals Procedures

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Subpart F—Implementation of the Equal Access to Justice Act in Agency Proceedings

Authority: 5 U.S.C. 504(c)(1).

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GENERAL PROVISIONS

§ 4.601 What is the purpose of this subpart?

- (a) The Equal Access to Justice Act provides for the award of attorney fees and other expenses to eligible individuals and entities who are parties to certain administrative proceedings (called “adversary adjudications”) before the Department of the Interior. Under the Act, an eligible party may receive an award when it prevails over the Department or other agency, unless the position of the Department or other agency was substantially justified or special circumstances make an award unjust. The regulations in this subpart describe the parties eligible for awards and the proceedings that are covered. They also explain how to apply for awards, and the procedures and standards that the Office of Hearings and Appeals will use in ruling on those applications.
- (b) The regulations in this subpart apply to any application for an award of attorney fees and other expenses that is:
 - (1) Pending on February 8, 2006; or
 - (2) Filed on or after February 8, 2006.

§ 4.602 What definitions apply to this subpart?

As used in this subpart:

Act means section 203(a)(1) of the Equal Access to Justice Act, Public Law 96-481, 5 U.S.C. 504, as amended.

Adjudicative officer means the deciding official(s) who presided at the adversary adjudication, or any successor official(s) assigned to decide the application.

Adversary adjudication means any of the following:

- (1) An adjudication under 5 U.S.C. 554 in which the position of the Department or other agency is presented by an attorney or other representative who enters an appearance and participates in the proceeding;
- (2) Any hearing conducted under section 6103(a) of the Program Fraud Civil Remedies Act of 1986 (31 U.S.C. 3801 *et seq.*); or
- (3) Any hearing or appeal involving the Religious Freedom Restoration Act of 1993 (42 U.S.C. 2000bb *et seq.*).

Affiliate means:

- (1) Any individual, corporation, or other entity that directly or indirectly controls or owns a majority of the voting shares or other interest of the applicant; or
- (2) Any corporation or other entity of which the applicant directly or indirectly owns or controls a majority of the voting shares or other interest.

Demand means the express demand of the Department or other agency that led to the adversary adjudication, but does not include a recitation by the Department or other agency of the maximum statutory penalty:

- (1) In the administrative complaint; or
- (2) Elsewhere when accompanied by an express demand for a lesser amount.

Department means the Department of the Interior or the component of the Department that is a party to the adversary adjudication (e.g., Bureau of Land Management).

Final disposition means the date on which either of the following becomes final and unappealable, both within the Department and to the courts:

- (1) A decision or order disposing of the merits of the proceeding; or
- (2) Any other complete resolution of the proceeding, such as a settlement or voluntary dismissal.

Other agency means any agency of the United States or the component of the agency that is a party to the adversary adjudication before the Office of Hearings and Appeals, other than the Department of the Interior and its components.

Party means a party as defined in 5 U.S.C. 551(3).

Position of the Department or other agency means:

- (1) The position taken by the Department or other agency in the adversary adjudication; and
- (2) The action or failure to act by the Department or other agency upon which the adversary adjudication is based.

Proceeding means an adversary adjudication as defined in this section.

You means a party to an adversary adjudication.

[36 FR 7186, Apr. 15, 1971, as amended at 88 FR 5794, Jan. 30, 2023]

§ 4.603 What proceedings are covered by this subpart?

- (a) The Act applies to adversary adjudications conducted by the Office of Hearings and Appeals, including proceedings to modify, suspend, or revoke licenses if they are otherwise adversary adjudications.
- (b) The Act does not apply to:
 - (1) Other hearings and appeals conducted by the Office of Hearings and Appeals, even if the Department uses procedures comparable to those in 5 U.S.C. 554 in such cases;
 - (2) Any proceeding in which the Department or other agency may prescribe a lawful present or future rate; or
 - (3) Proceedings to grant or renew licenses.
- (c) If a hearing or appeal includes both matters covered by the Act and matters excluded from coverage, any award made will include only fees and expenses related to covered issues.

§ 4.604 When am I eligible for an award?

- (a) To be eligible for an award of attorney fees and other expenses under the Act, you must:
 - (1) Be a party to the adversary adjudication for which you seek an award; and
 - (2) Show that you meet all conditions of eligibility in this section.
- (b) You are an eligible applicant if you are any of the following:
 - (1) An individual with a net worth of \$2 million or less;

- (2) The sole owner of an unincorporated business who has a net worth of \$7 million or less, including both personal and business interests, and 500 or fewer employees;
 - (3) A charitable or other tax-exempt organization described in section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code (26 U.S.C. 501(c)(3)) with 500 or fewer employees;
 - (4) A cooperative association as defined in section 15(a) of the Agricultural Marketing Act (12 U.S.C. 1141j(a)) with 500 or fewer employees;
 - (5) Any other partnership, corporation, association, unit of local government, or organization with a net worth of \$7 million or less and 500 or fewer employees; or
 - (6) For purposes of § 4.605(c), a small entity as defined in 5 U.S.C. 601(6).
- (c) For the purpose of eligibility, your net worth and the number of your employees must be determined as of the date the proceeding was initiated.
- (1) Your employees include all persons who regularly perform services for remuneration under your direction and control.
 - (2) Part-time employees must be included on a proportional basis.
- (d) You are considered an “individual” rather than a “sole owner of an unincorporated business” if:
- (1) You own an unincorporated business; and
 - (2) The issues on which you prevail are related primarily to personal interests rather than to business interests.
- (e) To determine your eligibility, your net worth and the number of your employees must be aggregated with the net worth and the number of employees of all of your affiliates. However, this paragraph does not apply if the adjudicative officer determines that aggregation would be unjust and contrary to the purposes of the Act in light of the actual relationship between the affiliated entities.
- (f) The adjudicative officer may determine that financial relationships other than those described in the definition of “affiliate” in § 4.602 constitute special circumstances that would make an award unjust.
- (g) If you participate in a proceeding primarily on behalf of one or more other persons or entities that would be ineligible, you are not eligible for an award.

§ 4.605 Under what circumstances may I receive an award?

- (a) You may receive an award for your fees and expenses in connection with a proceeding if:
 - (1) You prevailed in the proceeding or in a significant and discrete substantive portion of a proceeding; and
 - (2) The position of the Department or other agency over which you prevailed was not substantially justified. The Department or other agency has the burden of proving that its position was substantially justified.
- (b) An award will be reduced or denied if you have unduly or unreasonably protracted the proceeding or if special circumstances make the award sought unjust.
- (c) This paragraph applies to an adversary adjudication arising from an action by the Department or other agency to enforce compliance with a statutory or regulatory requirement:

- (1) If the demand of the Department or other agency in the action is excessive and unreasonable compared with the adjudicative officer's decision, then the adjudicative officer must award you your fees and expenses related to defending against the excessive demand, unless:
 - (i) You have committed a willful violation of law;
 - (ii) You have acted in bad faith; or
 - (iii) Special circumstances make an award unjust.
- (2) Fees and expenses awarded under this paragraph will be paid only if appropriations to cover the payment have been provided in advance.

§ 4.606 What fees and expenses may be allowed?

- (a) If the criteria in §§ 4.603 through 4.605 are met, you may receive an award under this subpart only for the fees and expenses of your attorney(s) and expert witness(es).
- (b) The adjudicative officer must base an award on rates customarily charged by persons engaged in the business of acting as attorneys and expert witnesses, even if the services were made available to you without charge or at a reduced rate.
 - (1) The maximum that can be awarded for the fee of an attorney is \$125 per hour.
 - (2) The maximum that can be awarded for the fee of an expert witness is the highest rate at which the Department or other agency pays expert witnesses with similar expertise.
 - (3) An award may also include the reasonable expenses of the attorney or expert witness as a separate item, if the attorney or expert witness ordinarily charges clients separately for those expenses.
- (c) The adjudicative officer may award only reasonable fees and expenses under this subpart. In determining the reasonableness of the fee for an attorney or expert witness, the adjudicative officer must consider the following:
 - (1) If the attorney or expert witness is in private practice, his or her customary fee for similar services;
 - (2) If the attorney or expert witness is your employee, the fully allocated cost of the services;
 - (3) The prevailing rate for similar services in the community in which the attorney or expert witness ordinarily performs services;
 - (4) The time actually spent in representing you in the proceeding;
 - (5) The time reasonably spent in light of the difficulty or complexity of the issues in the proceeding; and
 - (6) Any other factors that bear on the value of the services provided.
- (d) The adjudicative officer may award the reasonable cost of any study, analysis, engineering report, test, project, or similar matter prepared on your behalf to the extent that:
 - (1) The charge for the service does not exceed the prevailing rate for similar services; and
 - (2) The study or other matter was necessary for preparation of your case.

INFORMATION REQUIRED FROM APPLICANTS

§ 4.610 What information must my application for an award contain?

- (a) Your application for an award of fees and expenses under the Act must:
 - (1) Identify you;
 - (2) Identify the proceeding for which an award is sought;
 - (3) Show that you have prevailed;
 - (4) Specify the position of the Department or other agency that you allege was not substantially justified;
 - (5) Unless you are an individual, state the number of your employees and those of all your affiliates, and describe the type and purpose of your organization or business;
 - (6) State the amount of fees and expenses for which you seek an award;
 - (7) Be signed by you or your authorized officer or attorney;
 - (8) Contain or be accompanied by a written verification under oath or under penalty of perjury that the information in the application is true and correct; and
 - (9) Unless one of the exceptions in paragraph (b) of this section applies, include a statement that:
 - (i) Your net worth does not exceed \$2 million, if you are an individual; or
 - (ii) Your net worth and that of all your affiliates does not exceed \$7 million in the aggregate, if you are not an individual.
- (b) You do not have to submit the statement of net worth required by paragraph (a)(9) of this section if you do any of the following:
 - (1) Attach a copy of a ruling by the Internal Revenue Service that you qualify as a tax-exempt organization described in 26 U.S.C. 501(c)(3);
 - (2) Attach a statement describing the basis for your belief that you qualify under 26 U.S.C. 501(c)(3), if you are a tax-exempt organization that is not required to obtain a ruling from the Internal Revenue Service on your exempt status;
 - (3) State that you are a cooperative association as defined in section 15(a) of the Agricultural Marketing Act (12 U.S.C. 1141j(a)); or
 - (4) Seek fees and expenses under § 4.605(c) and provide information demonstrating that you qualify as a small entity under 5 U.S.C. 601.
- (c) You may also include in your application any other matters that you wish the adjudicative officer to consider in determining whether and in what amount an award should be made.

§ 4.611 What information must I include in my net worth exhibit?

- (a) Unless you meet one of the criteria in § 4.610(b), you must file with your application a net worth exhibit that meets the requirements of this section. The adjudicative officer may also require that you file additional information to determine your eligibility for an award.
- (b) The exhibit must show your net worth and that of any affiliates when the proceeding was initiated. The exhibit may be in any form that:
 - (1) Provides full disclosure of your and your affiliates' assets and liabilities; and

- (2) Is sufficient to determine whether you qualify under the standards in this subpart.
- (c) Ordinarily, the net worth exhibit will be included in the public record of the proceeding. However, if you object to public disclosure of information in any portion of the exhibit and believe there are legal grounds for withholding it from disclosure, you may submit that portion of the exhibit directly to the adjudicative officer in a sealed envelope labeled "Confidential Financial Information," accompanied by a motion to withhold the information from public disclosure.
 - (1) The motion must describe the information sought to be withheld and explain, in detail:
 - (i) Why it falls within one or more of the exemptions from mandatory disclosure under the Freedom of Information Act, 5 U.S.C. 552(b);
 - (ii) Why public disclosure of the information would adversely affect you; and
 - (iii) Why disclosure is not required in the public interest.
 - (2) You must serve the net worth exhibit and motion on counsel representing the agency against which you seek an award, but you are not required to serve it on any other party to the proceeding.
 - (3) If the adjudicative officer finds that the information should not be withheld from disclosure, it must be placed in the public record of the proceeding. Otherwise, any request to inspect or copy the exhibit will be disposed of in accordance with the Department's procedures under the Freedom of Information Act, 43 CFR 2.7 *et seq.*

§ 4.612 What documentation of fees and expenses must I provide?

- (a) Your application must be accompanied by full documentation of the fees and expenses for which you seek an award, including the cost of any study, analysis, engineering report, test, project, or similar matter.
- (b) You must submit a separate itemized statement for each professional firm or individual whose services are covered by the application, showing:
 - (1) The hours spent in connection with the proceeding by each individual;
 - (2) A description of the specific services performed;
 - (3) The rates at which each fee has been computed;
 - (4) Any expenses for which reimbursement is sought;
 - (5) The total amount claimed; and
 - (6) The total amount paid or payable by you or by any other person or entity for the services provided.
- (c) The adjudicative officer may require you to provide vouchers, receipts, logs, or other substantiation for any fees or expenses claimed, in accordance with § 4.624.

§ 4.613 When may I file an application for an award?

- (a) You may file an application whenever you have prevailed in the proceeding or in a significant and discrete substantive portion of the proceeding. You must file the application no later than 30 days after the final disposition of the proceeding.
- (b) Consideration of an application for an award must be stayed if:

- (1) Any party seeks review or reconsideration of a decision in a proceeding in which you believe you have prevailed; or
- (2) The Department or other agency (or the United States on its behalf) appeals an adversary adjudication to a court.
- (c) A stay under paragraph (b)(1) of this section will continue until there has been a final disposition of the review or reconsideration of the decision. A stay under paragraph (b)(2) of this section will continue until either:
 - (1) A final and unreviewable decision is rendered by the court on the appeal; or
 - (2) The underlying merits of the case have been finally determined.

PROCEDURES FOR CONSIDERING APPLICATIONS

§ 4.620 How must I file and serve documents?

- (a) You must file and serve all documents related to an application for an award under this subpart on all other parties to the proceeding in the same manner as other pleadings in the proceeding, except as provided in § 4.611(c) for confidential information. The Department or other agency and all other parties must likewise file and serve their pleadings and related documents on you and on each other, in the same manner as other pleadings in the proceeding.
- (b) A document may be electronically transmitted under the terms specified in the OHA Standing Orders on Electronic Transmission issued by the Director. When done in accordance with the Standing Orders, a document may be:
 - (1) Filed by electronic transmission; and
 - (2) Served on or transmitted to a person or party by electronic transmission if that person or party has consented to such means.

[36 FR 7186, Apr. 15, 1971, as amended at 88 FR 5794, Jan. 30, 2023]

§ 4.621 When may the Department or other agency file an answer?

- (a) Within 30 days after service of an application, the Department or other agency against which an award is sought may file an answer to the application. However, if consideration of an application has been stayed under § 4.613(b), the answer is due within 30 days after the final disposition of the review or reconsideration of the decision.
 - (1) Except as provided in paragraph (a)(2) of this section, failure to file an answer within the 30-day period may be treated as a consent to the award requested. In such case, the adjudicative officer will issue a decision in accordance with § 4.625 based on the record before him or her.
 - (2) Failure to file an answer within the 30-day period will not be treated as a consent to the award requested if the Department or other agency either:
 - (i) Requests an extension of time for filing; or
 - (ii) Files a statement of intent to negotiate under paragraph (b) of this section.

- (b) If the Department or other agency and you believe that the issues in the fee application can be settled, you may jointly file a statement of intent to negotiate a settlement. Filing this statement will extend for an additional 30 days the time for filing an answer, and the adjudicative officer may grant further extensions if you and the agency counsel so request.
- (c) The answer must explain in detail any objections to the award requested and identify the facts relied on to support the Department's or other agency's position. If the answer is based on any alleged facts not already in the record of the proceeding, the Department or other agency must include with the answer either supporting affidavits or a request for further proceedings under § 4.624.

§ 4.622 When may I file a reply?

Within 15 days after service of an answer, you may file a reply. If your reply is based on any alleged facts not already in the record of the proceeding, you must include with the reply either supporting affidavits or a request for further proceedings under § 4.624.

§ 4.623 When may other parties file comments?

Any party to a proceeding other than the applicant and the Department or other agency may file comments on an application within 30 days after it is served or on an answer within 15 days after it is served. A commenting party may not participate further in the proceedings on the application unless the adjudicative officer determines that the public interest requires such participation in order to permit full exploration of matters raised in the comments.

§ 4.624 When may further proceedings be held?

- (a) Ordinarily, the determination of an award will be made on the basis of the written record. However, the adjudicative officer may order further proceedings, which will be held only when necessary for full and fair resolution of the issues and will be conducted as promptly as possible.
- (b) The adjudicative officer may order further proceedings on his or her own initiative or in response to a request by you or by the Department or other agency. A request for further proceedings under this section must:
 - (1) Identify the information sought or the disputed issues; and
 - (2) Explain why the additional proceedings are necessary to resolve the issues.
- (c) As to issues other than substantial justification (such as your eligibility or substantiation of fees and expenses), further proceedings under this section may include an informal conference, oral argument, additional written submissions, pertinent discovery, or an evidentiary hearing.
- (d) The adjudicative officer will determine whether the position of the Department or other agency was substantially justified based on the administrative record of the adversary adjudication as a whole.

§ 4.625 How will my application be decided?

The adjudicative officer must issue a decision on the application promptly after completion of proceedings on the application. The decision must include written findings and conclusions on all of the following that are relevant to the decision:

- (a) Your eligibility and status as a prevailing party;

- (b) The amount awarded, and an explanation of the reasons for any difference between the amount requested and the amount awarded;
- (c) Whether the position of the Department or other agency was substantially justified;
- (d) Whether you unduly protracted the proceedings; and
- (e) Whether special circumstances make an award unjust.

§ 4.626 How will an appeal from a decision be handled?

- (a) If the adjudicative officer is an administrative law judge, you or the Department or other agency may appeal his or her decision on the application to the appeals board that would have jurisdiction over an appeal involving the merits of the proceeding. The appeal will be subject to the same regulations and procedures that would apply to an appeal involving the merits of the proceeding. The appeals board will issue the final Departmental or other agency decision on the application.
- (b) If the adjudicative officer is a panel of appeals board judges, their decision on the application is final for the Department or other agency.

§ 4.627 May I seek judicial review of a final decision?

You may seek judicial review of a final Departmental or other agency decision on an award as provided in 5 U.S.C. 504(c)(2).

§ 4.628 How will I obtain payment of an award?

- (a) To obtain payment of an award against the Department or other agency, you must submit:
 - (1) A copy of the final decision granting the award; and
 - (2) A certification that no party is seeking review of the underlying decision in the United States courts, or that the process for seeking review of the award has been completed.
- (b) If the award is against the Department:
 - (1) You must submit the material required by paragraph (a) of this section to the following address:
Director, Office of Financial Management, Policy, Management and Budget, U.S. Department of the Interior, Washington, DC 20240.
 - (2) Payment will be made by electronic funds transfer whenever possible. A representative of the Department will contact you for the information the Department needs to process the electronic funds transfer.
- (c) If the award is against another agency, you must submit the material required by paragraph (a) of this section to the chief financial officer or other disbursing official of that agency. Agency counsel must promptly inform you of the title and address of the appropriate official.
- (d) The Department or other agency will pay the amount awarded to you within 60 days of receiving the material required by this section.