Salary and Benefits as an Early Career Scientist at NASA Goddard Space Flight Center

Last Updated February 2022

In this document, we will provide guidance to the salaries and benefits that apply to early career scientists at NASA GSFC, explaining what to expect, and how to potentially bring up the topic with your (future) supervisor. It is written from the perspective of contractors/co-op scientists at GSFC, but some aspects may apply to new civil servants as well. Unlike the NASA Postdoctoral Program (NPP), which will be used as a point of comparison throughout this document, if you start as a contractor with one of the sponsoring organizations, there are little to no guidelines on what salary and benefits you may expect. Unless you specifically inquire about the conditions, you will likely not find out until you receive your contract, as there is typically not much more to be found than '*Salary and benefits are competitive'*. We hope the information in this document helps incoming contractor/co-op scientists to consider negotiating their starting salary and benefits, in addition to annual increases in salary and benefits if they stay with an employer longer.

As a contractor/co-op scientist at GSFC, in most cases you will be effectively earning your salary through grant applications, or by working on your supervisor's grant money (particularly as you start). This is what is called a 'soft-money scientist'. Depending on the stage of your career, your independence, and your relationship with your supervisor/team, this means you have a responsibility to obtain your own funding and shape the direction of your work. To some degree, one may be able to choose to pursue different project or research topics depending on how successful funding proposals are. The fact that your job is often reliant on competitive funding is a source of stress and uncertainty, and the degree of this depends largely on your personal situation. One person might be very happy to work for less if this means the opportunity to do their dream job of working on space missions, and thus be willing to accept less job security, whereas another person might have financial responsibilities that require more stability and compensation. These are all personal choices, but knowledge is key here, and working anywhere should always be an informed decision.

The salary of a starting NPP at GSFC is $80,000 (as of July 1, 2022) for fellows directly out of graduate school (more experienced fellows should receive higher salaries as a senior NPP). Note that all salaries typically have a yearly increase for inflation or cost of living adjustment (COLA). NPP salaries also vary by location so someone at a different NASA center may be making more or less then this amount. On top of that, NPPs salaries increase on a yearly base, typically by around $1500. For contractors/co-op scientists, no standard exists, and salaries and benefits are not transparent. Therefore, your hiring civil servant may take the NPP salaries as a starting point, or the host institute may have a method to determine your compensation. Note that NPPs do not pay FICA taxes (typically around 7.5% of your salary) that will be withheld from your salary as a contractor/co-op scientist but do have to pay *both* personal and employer federal, state, and local tax. Likewise, a NPP's health insurance is considered taxable income which is not typical with other positions. Be sure to include these into your calculations when comparing your salary with that of an NPP. Many factors go into what your salary may be, and no single answer exists. The best way to prepare for a conversation about this is to be informed about what you can expect. Look at what the current rates are for NPPs, and what a civil servant with your experience level (GS11-13) may make. In addition, one could look at the American Institute of Physics' salary calculator as a helpful tool when negotiating your salary to see a range of salaries based on your experience and location (https://www.aip.org/statistics/salary-calculator). Please note this calculator shows the average pay for women is less than men, and we encourage you to advocate for the higher average salary regardless of gender.

In terms of negotiations, it is your experience level that gives you an opening to a higher pay scale. Consider things like your specific experiences (you may need less training than other candidates), responsibilities, teaching experience, proposal writing history (especially the amount of money awarded in grants as PI, Science-PI, or Co-I), scientific output and visibility (e.g., papers, presentations, relevant committee work), panel/review work, outreach and science communication, and awards. Provide whoever is presenting your offer with specific information and numbers about the above credentials that justify a higher title or salary. Even small increases add up, because it is likely that the starting salary here determines future raises and salaries as well. Even $100 adds up to $30,000 over 30 years of employment, and that's not even considering cumulative interest. It is likely your employer is open to having this conversation, and even if there is no change in your compensation, it may put you at a more equal footing to your supervisor. It is an opening to learn about how funding and financing in your team and organization works, and this is very valuable information. Keep in mind that it is always more difficult and expensive to bring on a new employee and train them compared to keeping you, even with higher compensation.

Aside from your salary, you can expect to receive benefits, including matching contributions to a retirement plan. Often the employing organization matches your contributions (often matches are around 3—5 % of your pre-taxed salary) into your 401(k) or similar plan. For some organizations the matching only starts after a fixed amount of time such as a year. Health care (Medical, vision, and dental) of course is your prime benefit and differs per employing organization. Be sure to do your research on healthcare before you start. Note that your healthcare may not start from day one of your employment and that there are differences in the coverage offered by the different universities. Especially consider your healthcare coverage options carefully as these differ substantially between the host institutes. Other possible benefits that are often offered by employers but can vary a lot include term life insurance, non-taxed travel or medical spending accounts, paid time off (PTO), and family leave. Keep in mind that if you are on a cooperative agreement, you may be able to change host institution if the benefits do not meet your needs.

To give an idea of the real costs of your labor, take for example a yearly $80,000 salary (this is reasonable salary for the DC area where yearly rental rates can reach $24,000) as your 1.0 full time equivalent (FTE) rate. On top of this, the host organization may take an additional 30% fringe costs (note that the percentages listed here vary from institution but are provided to give you a rough idea of what to expect), which covers healthcare, retirement, and other benefits. Furthermore, the host organization charges an additional 28% to run their organization, resulting in a total cost of $126,000 per FTE. There may be additional GSFC-fees depending on how your grant is structured. The difference between the contracting organization is in how much their overhead is and what benefits you receive. Ultimately, this will make your contribution to a proposal more or less expensive per FTE.