

THE COTTON BOARD

Strengthening the Fiber of our Industry

From: William Gillon, President & CEO, The Cotton Board
Date: September 15, 2020
Subject: Diversity and Inclusion Efforts

The purpose of this memo is to outline efforts of the Cotton Board to enhance diversity within its membership, to increase participation among stakeholders, and to ensure that new members are immediate and active contributors to the Cotton Research and Promotion Program. The Cotton Board's diversity and inclusion policy has evolved over the past several years to expand and incorporate staff training and performance standards, an orientation program focusing on the roles and responsibilities of new members, the appointment of advisors to help broaden the prospective leadership pool and increase the perspectives available to members, a commitment to utilize broader communication channels to spread the word about participation opportunities, and more direct member oversight regarding the organization's progress.

1. Staff Training and Performance Standards

- **Employee Goal Setting - Bonus:** Every employee of the Cotton Board annually sets performance goals with their manager. Achieving those goals is a requirement for full participation in the Cotton Board bonus program. In addition, the following goal is a standard component of each Regional Communication Manager's (RCM) annual evaluation. Achievement of this goal will be demonstrated through a report developed by the RCM.
 - *Emphasize outreach to minorities and other less-represented producer-groups (including young and female producers) in order to enhance the Cotton Board's diversity outreach and to build depth for potential nominations. Among other steps -- build strategic partnerships with nominating organizations through meetings and discussions designed to broaden outreach and identify obstacles to greater participation; increase solicitation of minority and under-represented groups' participation in Cotton Board tours and field programs in order to increase awareness of the program and leadership opportunities; and participate in training programs designed to improve organizational outreach to minorities and under-represented groups.*
- **Staff Training Programs:** Management of the Cotton Board organizes staff training programs designed to educate staff on diversity issues, to improve organizational outreach to minorities and under-represented groups, to help the organization identify and eliminate barriers to broader participation in the Cotton Research and Promotion Program, and to ensure that staff are prepared to assist in orienting and welcoming new participants.



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2. Effective and Active Incorporation of New Members

- **Revised Orientation Efforts.** Diversity only works if new participants are welcomed and given the tools they need to feel valued and to contribute to the work of the organization. The Cotton Board holds an annual orientation program for all new members, alternates and advisors. The orientation program focuses on the roles and responsibilities of new members, alternates and advisors – What do new members need to know in order to quickly and effectively contribute to the Cotton Board and the Research and Promotion Program? Orientation is conducted immediately prior to the first meeting every year. The orientation format encourages feedback, incorporates time for small group discussions, and includes member testimonials.
- **Mentors.** The Cotton Board assigns a mentor to each new member, alternate or advisor. The mentor works to engage, educate, and answer questions about Cotton Board activities and participation.

3. Advisors to Broaden Perspectives

- **Advisor Positions:** The Cotton Board solicits nominations for two Advisor Positions for the Cotton Board, specifically nominated for the purpose of providing insight on issues affecting minority and under-represented producers including production, promotional, and research. Certified Producer and Importer Organizations and other interested trade associations with a significant number of members who produce cotton or are involved in the importation of cotton and cotton products, as determined by the Cotton Board, are asked to submit nominations. The Cotton Board submits these nominees to the Secretary of Agriculture as a part of the normal member/alternate nomination process.

4. Broader Communication Channels

- **Expanded Communication of Nominating Organization Meetings:** Cotton Board RCMs, the Vice President of Importer Relations, and the Cotton Board Communications Department work with outside organizations representing minority and under-represented groups to publicize meetings of nominating organizations to increase awareness of opportunities for participation in such organizations. This outreach is annually documented as a part of the employee evaluation process.
- **Communication of Cotton Board Policies:** The Cotton Board annually communicates its board diversity policies and USDA/AMS diversity guidelines and objectives to those certified organizations scheduled to participate in annual nominating caucuses. Among other efforts, the Cotton Board Chairman annually conducts a conference call with all nominating organization representatives in order to discuss the Cotton Board's diversity policy. The Cotton Board's Governance and Administration Committee Chairman sends a letter to nominating organizations communicating this policy prior to nominating caucuses each year.

5. Oversight and Reporting

- **Committee Oversight.** The Cotton Board's Governance and Administration Committee currently oversees the diversity efforts of the Cotton Board.

- **Measurements/Reporting.** The level of achieved diversity on The Cotton Board is periodically reported to the Governance and Administration Committee. Currently, those reports primarily use objective standards, such as the overall diversity in the cotton industry as evidenced by USDA's [Census of Agriculture](#). The Cotton Board will continue to explore introducing more measurements and comments, possibly using surveys and member evaluations as a means to discuss this issue. Although the Board continues to explore, it has been difficult to find objective measurements of diversity with respect to the importer segment of the Cotton Board.
- **Diversity and Inclusion Assessment.** The Cotton Board periodically conducts an assessment of its diversity and inclusion efforts to identify areas in need of attention. This report is reviewed by the Governance and Administration Committee and submitted to the Secretary of Agriculture.

6. Nondiscrimination, Equal Opportunity, Respectful Workplace

Research and Promotion Programs are required by the U.S. Department of Agriculture to comply with all federal requirements for equal opportunity, nondiscrimination, and a respectful workplace. The following is from the Cotton Board employee handbook:

The Cotton Board is an equal opportunity employer. As a quasi-government agency, The Cotton Board honors all applicable conditions of employment which are referenced within USDA's Civil Rights Policies. The Cotton Board ensures civil rights and equal employment opportunities for all employees and applicants for employment without regard to disability, age, race, nationality, sex, color, religion, veteran status or sexual orientation. In addition, The Cotton Board complies with applicable state and local laws governing nondiscrimination in employment. This policy applies to all terms and conditions of employment, including, but not limited to, hiring, placement, promotion, termination, layoff, recall, leaves of absence, compensation, and training.

The Cotton Board provides extensive protections for all of its employees, details complaint procedures, and regularly provides harassment and respectful workplace training for its employees.

Specific Policy Provisions

Applicable Cotton Board Policy and Procedures with respect to diversity and Cotton Board Employee Handbook provisions with respect to equal opportunity and a respectful workplace are set out in the Attachment to this Memo. Cotton Board Policy and Procedures are approved by the Cotton Board membership and reviewed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Attachment – Excerpts from Specific Cotton Board Policies

Cotton Board Internal Policy and Procedures - 2020

Section GOV 2.0 Board Diversity

GOV 2.1 Policy

The Cotton Board supports diversity among its board membership as well as the diversity goals outlined within the *USDA/AMS Oversight Guidelines for Commodity Research and Promotion Programs*.

GOV 2.2 Board Diversity Statement

The Cotton Board seeks to promote diversity and ensure equal opportunity and inclusion for all those who qualify for nomination and appointment to the Cotton Board regardless of race, ethnicity, sex, disability, socio-economic status, religion or sexual orientation. Further, the Board strongly encourages certified organizations to keep in mind the benefits that diverse membership and leadership will bring to the Cotton Research & Promotion Program, when considering individuals for nomination to the Cotton Board.

GOV 2.3 Nomination and Appointment of Members, Alternates & Advisors

The Nomination and Appointment of Members, Alternate Members and Advisors to the Cotton Board is a process governed almost exclusively by the Cotton Research and Promotion Act and Order. Nominees are selected by organizations (CIOs & CPOs) certified by USDA as being duly representative of the Program’s range of stakeholders, and appointments are made by the Secretary of Agriculture from among such nominees.

While the organization exercises only limited influence throughout this process, the Cotton Board is in the position to make recommendations to certified organizations regarding “qualifications” for membership. It is in this way and by regularly communicating the importance and value of diversity and offering to support the efforts of individual certified organizations; that the Board will encourage diversity among the candidates for nomination and appointment.

1. Policies & Procedures

- a. The Cotton Board will maintain and periodically review a policy statement promoting the diversity of board membership.
- b. The Board will periodically review and consult with USDA/AMS regarding the department’s diversity guidelines and objectives.
- c. The Board will maintain and support a term-limit policy which facilitates greater opportunities for fresh leadership and perspectives.
- d. The Governance and Administration Committee may appoint an *ad hoc* subcommittee on Diversity and Inclusion to oversee the diversity and inclusion efforts of the Cotton Board. Such subcommittee will report to the Governance and

Administration Committee and review reports and actions of the Cotton Board concerning diversity and inclusion.

2. Nomination & Appointment Process

- a. The Cotton Board will annually communicate its own statement re: Board diversity and USDA/AMS diversity guidelines and objectives to those certified organizations scheduled to participate in annual nominating caucuses.
 - i. A conference call may be conducted by the Cotton Board’s Chairman with all CIO/CPO representatives in order to review diversity efforts and objectives.
 - ii. The policies and guidelines above will be communicated via a letter from the Board’s Governance and Administration Committee Chairman, prior to nominating caucuses each year.
- b. Upon request, the Board will be available to assist any certified organization to determine demographic and other diversity characteristics within their respective state, region or segment.
- c. The Cotton Board will solicit nominations from certified nominating organizations and third-party organizations representing a significant number of cotton producers or importers for a limited number of Advisor positions to be recommended to the Secretary of Agriculture for the purpose of providing insight on production, promotional, and research issues affecting minority or under-represented producers. The Governance and Administration Committee will oversee this process and determine the number of Advisor nominations to be submitted to the Secretary of Agriculture. *(See Policy Re: Cotton Board Advisors)*

3. Benchmark & Review

- a. The Cotton Board will periodically conduct an assessment of its diversity and inclusion efforts to evaluate its effectiveness and identify areas in need of attention. This report will be reviewed by the Governance and Administration Committee and submitted to the Secretary of Agriculture as a part of the annual nomination process.

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GOV 10.5. Advisor for Diverse Perspectives

The Advisor for Diverse Perspectives is a non-voting advisor to the Board appointed by the Secretary to serve for a term of three years. Expenses for travel and other required participation is reimbursed in the same manner as Board Members and Alternates. He/she will be invited to attend the three regular Cotton Board meetings held each year. All advisors will be assigned to Program and other committees of the Cotton Board, similarly to members and alternates.

1. General Criteria. The general criteria for the Advisor for Diverse Perspectives is as follows:

- a. The nominee should demonstrate a significant background and knowledge of the cotton industry, specifically issues affecting minority, young, or under-represented cotton producers and consumers within the cotton industry.
 - b. The nominee should demonstrate a willingness to participate in the work of the Cotton Board and to use his/her perspective to provide insight on production, promotional, and research issues affecting minority, young, and under-represented cotton producers or consumers.
 - c. The nominee should not be an employee of, or have an interest in, any individual or company that has representation on the Cotton Board.
 - d. The nominee should enhance the work of the Cotton Board by helping represent the interests of minority, young, or under-represented cotton producers or of similarly situated members of the public by presenting new, diverse perspectives and information to the Cotton Board concerning the impact of its programs on minority, young, or under-represented cotton producers or consumers and other perspectives that will contribute to the Cotton Board’s overall mission.
 - e. The nominee may not be a registered lobbyist.
2. Search and Nominating Process
- a. The Cotton Board may periodically solicit nominations for Advisors for Diverse Perspectives for the Cotton Board. Certified Producer and Importer Organizations and other interested trade associations with a significant number of members who produce cotton or are involved in the importation of cotton and cotton products, as determined by the Cotton Board, will be asked to submit nominations of individuals who meet the criteria established by the Cotton Board for these positions.
 - b. The Cotton Board’s Governance and Administration Committee will review all nominations received and submit recommendations to the full Board. The Cotton Board may submit two (2) nominees to the Secretary of Agriculture (first choice, second choice) for each advisor position to be filled. The nominations will be submitted as a part of the regular member/alternate appointment process for Cotton Board Members and Alternates.
 - c. Whenever there is an opening in this position, staff will consult with the Governance and Administration Committee and propose a timeline for submitting nominations to the Secretary of Agriculture.

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Section PHR 1.0 Wage and Salary Administration [Excerpts from Cotton Board Policies and Procedures - 2020]

PHR 1.1 Scope

It is the goal of the Cotton Board’s management to create a desirable and fulfilling workplace for its employees.

The Cotton Board will --

1. Operate as an equal opportunity employer in accordance with relevant local state and federal employment laws;
2. Use clear, transparent and measurable performance appraisals to evaluate employees;
3. Use salary grades to determine wages for each job;
4. Use specific measures to determine incentive pay;
5. Strive to encourage appropriate employee development opportunities; and
6. Provide a positive, supportive work environment.

PHR 1.2 General Employment Policies

1. **Equal Opportunity Employer:** The Cotton Board is an equal opportunity employer and honors all applicable conditions of employment referenced in USDA's Civil Rights Policies (See Board Service Site in Staff Library). The Cotton Board ensures civil rights and equal employment opportunities for all employees and applicants without regard to disability, age, race, nationality, sex, color, religion, veteran status or sexual orientation. In addition, the Cotton Board complies with state and local laws governing nondiscrimination in employment.
2. **Employment at Will:** The Cotton Board is an at-will employer. This policy is not a contract of employment for any fixed term
3. **Job Descriptions:** Job descriptions are maintained by the Director of Operations for each position.

Cotton Board Employee Handbook Provisions

[Excerpts from Cotton Board Employee Handbook - 2020]

Employment Standards, Performance Appraisal and Compensation

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Code of Conduct

The Cotton Board requires its employees to observe the highest standards of business and personal ethics in the conduct of their duties and responsibilities. As employees and representatives of The Cotton Board, we must practice honesty and integrity in fulfilling our responsibilities and comply with all applicable laws and regulations. Actions that damage, or may potentially damage, The Cotton Board or its reputation will not be tolerated.

The Cotton Board complies strictly with all laws and regulations that apply to its business, including laws concerning discrimination, harassment, civil rights, and the illegal use of drugs. Professional behavior towards colleagues is an obligation of all employees of The Cotton Board.

This section provides specifics with respect to personal and professional conduct in the workplace. This “Code of Conduct” encompasses issues of –

- financial accountability;
- confidentiality;
- conflicts of interest;
- non-discrimination;
- harassment’ and
- a respectful workplace.

This Code of Conduct sets out a complaint procedure and whistleblower policy for Cotton Board employees who believe any aspect of this Code of Conduct is being violated. **It is the responsibility of all employees to report actual or suspected violations of this Code of Conduct.**

Financial Accountability

The Cotton Board requires honest, accurate and timely recording and reporting of information to all stakeholders. Employees of The Cotton Board are responsible for maintaining the Board's books, records, accounts, funds and financial statements in accordance with applicable rules and regulations, in accordance with law, and in accordance with rules and regulations of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Employees should protect The Cotton Board's assets and ensure their efficient use. All assets are to be used for legitimate Cotton Board business purposes. It is a violation of the Code of Conduct for an employee to misappropriate any assets of The Cotton Board including but not limited to funds, property, equipment, supplies and proprietary information.

Employees are prohibited from:

- A. Making unauthorized commitments or promises of any kind purporting to bind The Cotton Board or any Cotton Board committee; and
- B. Giving preferential treatment to any private organization or individual.

Confidential Information

Maintaining confidentiality is a critically important duty, both to our stakeholders and to the organization. Information which is proprietary to The Cotton Board, Cotton Incorporated, or the Cotton Research & Promotion Program in general must never be disclosed to persons outside The Cotton Board for any reason whatsoever, or used for any purpose other than as authorized by The Cotton Board in the course of its business or as required by law.

Cotton Board Business, which includes any business conducted on behalf of The Cotton Research & Promotion Program by its sole source contractor Cotton Incorporated, is also confidential and should not be shared with persons outside The Cotton Board for anything other than authorized Cotton Board purposes.

Employees must:

- A. Refrain from discussing non-public business matters outside the office;
- B. Take care that emails, text messages, letters and faxes are directed to the correct recipient at all times; and,
- C. Not engage or assist in the unauthorized use or disclosure of confidential or privileged information obtained in connection with an employee's work at The Cotton Board.

Confidentiality Agreement- Annually, employees are required to sign a confidentiality agreement as a condition of employment with The Cotton Board.

Conflicts of Interest

It is the policy of The Cotton Board that no employee should seek or accept gifts or favors that might influence, or appear to influence, his or her judgment in representing The Cotton Board. It is understood that the interests of The Cotton Board and the Cotton Research & Promotion Program are one and the same and that such interests, business or otherwise, most often extend to the programs and business activities of Cotton Incorporated.

In implementing this policy, the following guidelines should be observed by all employees:

1. Except for inexpensive gifts, such as advertising novelties or other items that are distributed generally to all of a supplier's customers, employees should not accept gifts or favors from suppliers, prospective suppliers, or other companies with whom Cotton Board or Cotton Incorporated funds are spent. Gifts, if received, should be returned with a letter to the supplier explaining The Cotton Board's policy.
2. Cotton Board employees must avoid any conflict of interest or appearance thereof if entering into any personal financial obligations with any individuals or entities with which The Cotton Board or Cotton Incorporated does business or with whom they interact in furtherance of Cotton Board business.

Employees should discuss any questions or problems that they may have about this policy regarding gifts from suppliers with their immediate supervisor or the President/CEO.

Conflict of Interest Statement. Annually, employees are required to sign a conflict of interest statement as a condition of employment with the Cotton Board.

Nondiscrimination, Equal Opportunity, Respectful Workplace

Equal Employment Opportunity

The Cotton Board is an equal opportunity employer. As a quasi-government agency, The Cotton Board honors all applicable conditions of employment which are referenced within USDA's Civil Rights Policies. The Cotton Board ensures civil rights and equal employment opportunities for all employees and applicants for employment without regard to disability, age, race, nationality, sex, color, religion, veteran status or sexual orientation. In addition, The Cotton Board complies with applicable state and local laws governing nondiscrimination in employment. This policy applies to all terms and conditions of employment, including, but not limited to, hiring, placement, promotion, termination, layoff, recall, leaves of absence, compensation, and training.

Nondiscrimination Against and Accommodation of Individuals with Disabilities

The Cotton Board complies with the Americans With Disabilities Act and provides reasonable accommodation for such individuals in accordance with the Act. Qualified individuals with disabilities may make requests for reasonable accommodations to the Director of Operations.

Policy Against Harassment

The Cotton Board expressly prohibits any form of employee harassment based on disability, age, race, nationality, sex, color, religion, veteran status or sexual orientation.

With respect to sexual harassment, the Cotton Board specifically prohibits the following:

1. Unwelcome sexual advances; requests for sexual favors; and all other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual or otherwise offensive nature; and
2. Offensive comments, jokes, innuendos, and other sexually oriented statements.

Harassment is particularly offensive when it is coupled with an abuse of authority, such that --

1. Submission to such conduct is made either explicitly or implicitly a term or condition of employment;
2. Submission to or rejection of such conduct is used as the basis for decisions affecting an individual's employment; or
3. Such conduct has the purpose or effect of creating an intimidating, hostile, or offensive working environment.

It is impossible to list all conduct that would violate the policy against unlawful harassment. The Cotton Board may determine that other conduct or behavior is violative of this policy, at the Cotton Board's discretion. Offensive and inappropriate behavior need not rise to the level of sexual harassment within the meaning of applicable federal, state, or local law to be deemed a violation of this policy.

Employees should, first and foremost, respect each other's "personal space" and treat each other professionally at all times. It is critical that each employee respect someone's statement that a specific action or behavior makes them uncomfortable or is otherwise inappropriate. The offending action or behavior must be changed.

Workplace Violence

The Cotton Board expressly prohibits violence in the workplace. Every employee is expected to treat all other employees, visitors, contractors, and other non-employees with dignity, fairness, and respect.

Workplace violence can be any act of physical violence, threats of physical violence, harassment, intimidation, or other threatening, disruptive behavior that occurs at the work site. Workplace violence can affect or involve employees, visitors, contractors, and other non-employees. All threats or potential acts of violence should be taken seriously by employees and by management.

In the event of an incident of workplace violence, employees should notify management and, if appropriate, immediately call 911. Management will respond immediately to potential threats and violence and attempt to defuse escalating situations using appropriate resources, including law and emergency services, federal protection service, and onsite security, if necessary.

If a volatile or dangerous situation cannot be brought under control or employees are concerned about their safety, employees should either exit the office and leave the building or stay behind a locked door until given the "all clear" by Management or First Responders.

Employees should also review the Emergency Procedures outlined separately in this Handbook.

Applicability to Off-Premises Meetings and Business Activities

The Cotton Board Code of Conduct is meant to govern the conduct of Cotton Board employees, particularly when they are in the workplace or carrying out Cotton Board business. The protections and standards set out in the Code of Conduct are also applicable to off-premises activities, such as meetings of the Cotton Board, and actions involving non-employees with whom the employee is involved, directly or indirectly, in a business or potential business relationship, such as a Board Member or Alternate, producer, importer, or industry partner.

Responsibility to Report

It is the responsibility of all employees to report promptly actual or suspected conduct occurring within the organization that amounts to a serious violation of The Cotton Board's Code of Conduct. As stated above, this responsibility encompasses all aspects of financial accountability, breaches of confidentiality or conflict of interest requirements, violations of policies prohibiting discrimination, harassment, and violence in the workplace. This responsibility also encompasses actions that violate federal, state, or local laws or regulations, fraudulent conduct, and actions that otherwise amount to serious improper conduct.

This responsibility to report applies to **all** incidents of suspected violations of the Cotton Board's Code of Conduct, including those which occur off-premises or during off-hours, where the alleged offender is a supervisor, coworker, or even a non-employee with whom the employee is involved, directly or indirectly, in a business or potential business relationship, such as a Board Member or Alternate, producer, importer, or industry partner

Complaint and Investigation Procedures for The Cotton Board

This complaint procedure is intended to enable employees and others to report actual or suspected violations of The Cotton Board's Code of Conduct. Day-to-day issues involving disagreements or differences of opinion that arise among co-workers or between an employee and his or her supervisor do not fall within the scope of this complaint procedure.

Cotton Board employees who experience or witness any actual or suspected violation of The Cotton Board Code of Conduct or any job-related discrimination or harassment are encouraged to utilize the complaint procedure outlined in this section. This procedure will allow The Cotton Board to quickly and effectively investigate the complaint and take corrective action

1. Complaint Procedure

- a. Reports of violations of the Code of Conduct or any harassment or discrimination should be filed as early as possible following the alleged incident.
- b. The incident should be reported to the employee's immediate supervisor or to the Director of Operations.
 - a. If for any reason an employee is not comfortable speaking with their supervisor (including the situation where the supervisor is the individual whose conduct is the cause of concern) or the Director of Operations, the employee should report the matter to the President.

- b. If the matter to be reported involves conduct of the President of the organization, \or if the employee is concerned that the President will not adequately address the inappropriate conduct, the employee is encouraged to use the WHISTLEBLOWER HOTLINE– (901) ***-****. The Whistleblower Hotline will enable the employee to speak to *** at *** and Consulting, a Human Resources expert who is not in the Cotton Board offices and is tasked with the responsibility of ensuring employee complaints are investigated so that appropriate, corrective steps can be taken.
 - c. If the employee is not comfortable with any of the above complaint procedures, the employee may report any suspected violations of the Code of Conduct to the current Cotton Board Chairman.
 - d. Under certain limited circumstances, an employee may have the right to assert a program discrimination claim with AMS under the Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Board employees may contact AMS Civil Rights at 202-690-3640 for more information on filing such a program discrimination complaint.
 - e. Employees who believe they have personally been subjected to unlawful discrimination or harassment may also choose to file a complaint directly with the federal or state Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, as more specifically outlined below.
 - f. In addition, if an employee feels that Program funds are being mismanaged, they may call USDA’s Office of Inspector General at 1-800-424-9121.
2. Investigation by The Cotton Board.
 - a. Upon receipt of any complaint under this section, The Cotton Board will undertake a prompt and thorough investigation of the allegations. Confidentiality will be maintained to the maximum extent possible consistent with the organization’s policy to conduct a thorough investigation.
 - b. Supervisors who receive complaints of a violation of the Code of Conduct or of harassment or discrimination are to forward them immediately to the President/CEO. If the complaint involves the President/CEO, the supervisor should contact the Whistleblower Hotline. The supervisor may also choose to contact the Chairman of The Cotton Board or USDA’s Office of the Inspector General if the matter is serious and urgent or if the supervisor believes that internal investigations of the matter are not being pursued appropriately.
 - c. If the reporting employee feels that the matter is not being addressed adequately, he or she should promptly bring it to the attention of the next level of management, or another member of management with whom the employee feels comfortable, up to and including the Chairman of The Cotton Board. They may also choose to pursue the other complaint avenues outlined in this section.

3. Response of the Cotton Board

If The Cotton Board determines that an employee is guilty of discriminating against or harassing another individual, it will take prompt and effective action to ensure the offending conduct or act(s) cease immediately and will take appropriate disciplinary action against the offending employee. If the identity of the complaining employee is known, Cotton Board senior management will provide a report to the employee concerning the conduct of the investigation.

4. No Retaliation

The Cotton Board strictly prohibits the harassment, retaliation, or taking of adverse employment actions against any employee who in good faith reports actual or suspected violations of law or The Cotton Board's Code of Conduct or who assists in the investigation of a complaint. An employee who retaliates against someone who has reported a violation in good faith is subject to discipline.

5. Confidentiality of Whistleblower

Violations or suspected violations may be submitted on a confidential basis by the complainant or may be submitted anonymously. Reports of violations or suspected violations will be kept confidential when possible, consistent with the need to conduct an adequate investigation.

6. Acting in Good Faith

Anyone filing a complaint concerning actual or suspected violations or other unethical or unlawful conduct must be acting in good faith and have reasonable grounds for believing the information disclosed indicates a violation of The Cotton Board's Code of Conduct. Providing false information in connection with a complaint could subject an employee to disciplinary action.

Filing Complaint with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission

Employees who believe they have personally been subjected to unlawful discrimination or harassment have two avenues they may use to file a complaint. They may (1) utilize the complaint and investigation procedure of The Cotton Board outlined above and (2) also choose to file directly with the federal or state Equal Employment Opportunity Commission.

- Filing a complaint utilizing the procedures of The Cotton Board will lead to a determination whether The Cotton Board's Code of Conduct or U.S. Department of Agriculture guidelines applicable to The Cotton Board have been violated.
- Filing a complaint with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission will involve that agency and will lead to a determination whether federal or state laws governing discrimination or harassment in the workplace have been violated.

While the Cotton Board encourages employees to utilize the Cotton Board Complaint Procedures as a first step, employees may utilize either or both of these avenues to file a complaint.

To be clear, when a complaint is filed through the Cotton Board Complaint Procedures, a standard of investigation will be utilized that is different from the federal or state EEOC complaint system. An investigation by the U.S. Department of Agriculture concerning a violation of its Civil Rights and Equal Opportunity requirements is not handled like an EEOC complaint

and USDA is not bound by the normal procedural, legal, or factual requirements of such an action.

Charges of employment discrimination filed directly with the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission are subject to certain requirements and filing deadlines. The U.S. EEOC has a public portal that should be used -- <https://publicportal.eeoc.gov/Portal/Login.aspx>.

Charges of discrimination may be filed with the Tennessee Human Rights Commission by calling them at (800) 251-3589 or visiting them in their Nashville office. According to their website, an Intake Officer can provide you with a complaint form and answer your questions. An electronic complaint form can be accessed online (URL:

<https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/humanrights/documents/FillableComplaintFormEnglishRevised2013NewAddress.pdf>)

or one can be mailed or emailed for the employee's convenience. There are time deadlines associated with the Tennessee state process as well.

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Volunteer Opportunities

The Cotton Board encourages employees to engage in philanthropic and community activities and will allow employees to donate 4-6 hours of their time per month during Cotton Board working hours.

Employees must receive approval from The Cotton Board's Director of Operations prior to volunteering. Employees must also receive approval for time off from their immediate supervisor. They should also remember that:

1. Such activities must not take precedence over Cotton Board work or deadlines;
2. Non-exempt employees must note volunteer time on their time sheet.
3. They may not, under any circumstances, disclose confidential information of The Cotton Board.
4. They may not use Cotton Board resources to directly support such activities.
5. The Cotton Board will not reimburse for mileage to and from volunteer opportunities, or any other out of pocket cost to the employee.

Training and Development

Attending business-related training and development seminars to enhance employee performance must be approved in advance by both the employee's supervisor and the Cotton Board's Director of Operations.