

By STEPHEN LOSEY | Last Updated: June 7, 2010

Seven agencies, including the Homeland Security, Defense and Veterans Affairs departments, are expected to start testing collective bargaining over so-called permissive subjects by November.

The 18-month pilot programs will also be held at the Labor and Treasury departments, the Office of Personnel Management and the Social Security Administration.

Permissive subjects are workplace decisions traditionally decided by managers, such as the types of technologies used in a workplace, as well as the number, types and grades of employees assigned to an organization.

The decision to decide such matters using collective bargaining was announced today by the National Council on Federal Labor-Management Relations, which consists of Obama administration officials and union leaders and was formed in December by the administration to resurrect Clinton-era labor-management partnerships.

The affected agencies and their unions have 45 days to plan how the pilot tests will work and then report back to the council, and four months to organize and train everybody involved.

Pilot programs will either cover at least 500 bargaining unit employees, or a significant agency process that affects any number of bargaining unit employees. The council agreed to let agencies limit pilot programs to cover some, but not all, permissive subjects if they choose.

OPM Director John Berry said his agency's test would include all permissive subjects. This eased the concerns of Carol Bonosaro of the Senior Executives Association, who worried that allowing programs to bargain piecemeal over categories, and not the full range of issues, would not yield useful, comprehensive test results.

Other agencies also could decide to try out permissive subject bargaining. Berry said the National Credit Union Administration and other small agencies have volunteered to conduct their own experiments.

The council will judge the pilot programs' effectiveness by measuring changes in organizational performance, employee satisfaction, and labor management relations. But the council has not yet decided on specific metrics to track those changes.