



March 19, 2009

The House Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands held a hearing today on "Restoring The Federal Public Lands Workforce." The focus was employee morale. Underlying the hearing was a report by the Partnership on Public Service entitled "Roadmap to Reform: A management framework for the next Administration." A copy of the statement by Kevin Simpson describing the report is attached. The key finding is that morale of the workforce of the land management agencies ranks well below average for all government agencies. Or, as the Chairman noted, below that of prison guards. I am also attaching the statement by Ron Thatcher of the National Federation of Federal Employees' Forest Service Council.

Hank Kashden gave a candid report of the problems the agency has had in centralizing finance, personnel, and IT at the Albuquerque Service Center. It was interesting to hear that all the Interior agencies are encountering the same problems with centralizing services. This suggests that the push comes from outside the agencies. Hank ended with an optimistic view that problems can be resolved.

A copy of my prepared statement is attached. I did not follow it with my oral remarks. I told the Chairman that the timing of the hearing was fortunate because political appointees were not in place and he was hearing from career employees who knew what was going on. The Park Service and BLM representatives were "Acting Directors". I noted that there is a long standing tradition of having a career professional lead the Forest Service and that this had served the agency and the country well. I added that it would serve the nation well if all the land management agencies were lead by career professionals. At the break, the Chairman came down to the witness table, thanked me for the suggestion, and said he agreed.

Steve Eubanks' statement was entered into the record.

The hearing was carried on CSpan. I would be interested in hearing the reactions of anyone who may have watched.

George

George Leonard
Chairman NAFSR

Statement of
George M. Leonard
National Association of Forest Service Retirees
Before the Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands
Committee on Natural Resources
U.S. House of Representatives
March 19, 2009

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

It is an honor to appear before you today to talk about the U.S. Forest Service. I spent 37 years working for the Forest Service, starting as a fire crewman on a Ranger District and finishing as Associate Chief in the Washington Office. I was proud to be a member of the Forest Service. I remain proud of the agency today.

I want to start by noting that I have been retired for 15 years. Much has changed in the agency since I retired and my comments should be evaluated in recognition of this. Retirees, particularly those of us who are members of the National Association of Forest Service Retirees¹, remain interested in the agency and are dedicated to its statutory multiple-use mission. We have many contacts with our former colleagues, so perhaps we can offer some useful perspectives.

The Forest Service has been in a continual downsizing mode for more than 15 years. For most of the Post WWII period the agency was a major supplier of timber to a dependant timber industry. There was strong political support for this role and the timber program, as well as supporting programs, was well funded. For various reasons, political support for the program was lost in the early 1990s. The sale program was reduced by more than 80 percent. The timber organization within the agency was largely dismantled over the next few years.

In more recent years, rising costs for fire suppression, within a constrained agency budget, have resulted in significant reductions in money available for basic stewardship of National Forest resources. The portion of the Forest Service budget devoted to fire has risen from 25 percent of the agency budget in 2000 to nearly 50 percent in 2008. This has necessitated major reductions in agency personnel working on programs other than fire. The number of foresters, wildlife biologists, hydrologists, other resource management

¹ The National Association of Forest Service Retirees is composed of people who spent their careers involved in protection and management of the National Forests and Grasslands, doing Research, managing the State and Private Forestry Program and in International Forestry activities. They are dedicated to the Multiple Use- Sustained Yield mission of the agency. As retirees they continue their dedication to the agency's statutory mission and work to support it.

specialists and technicians has dropped 35 percent in this period. The ability to carry out important stewardship activities on the Forests had declined commensurately. I do not know of any organization that can maintain morale in the face of such continual reductions.

I want to thank the Chairman, Chairman Rahall, Chairman Dicks, and other members of the Congress for their recognition of the funding problem and their efforts to remedy it. The National Association of Forest Service Retirees supports enactment of the FLAME Act that you have sponsored. This Act will separate the cost of emergency wildfire suppression from the rest of the Forest Service budget. Hopefully this will set the stage for restoring the capability of the organization to properly carry out its mission.

People that work for an organization want to be productive. People in government service want to feel they are accomplishing something that contributes to the public welfare. People in the Forest Service have a long tradition of working to make the National Forests an asset both to the Nation and to the small rural communities that are dependent upon them. Unfortunately, it is becoming harder and harder to get things done. Part of the problem is the lack of consensus on just how and for what purpose our National Forests should be managed. We have created a vast body of procedural requirements that must be completed before a project, no matter how simple, can go forward. Many of these processes have merit and, in fact, make for a better result. But, way too often, the cumulative impact of all the requirements becomes overwhelming or so time consuming that nothing gets done. Former Chief Dale Bosworth characterized this as the paralysis of analysis.

Let me tell you what I mean. In the 1950's I was a young forester on the Stanislaus National Forest in California. On a hot July day a fire escaped initial attack and burned about 300 acres of National Forest land before it was controlled. About 6 million board feet of mature ponderosa pine was killed. As soon as the fire was controlled we began the steps needed to offer the timber for sale. Within a month a timber sale had been prepared and sold. Logging began in late August and was completed that Fall. Because of the prompt action the timber had little loss in value. Deposits to the KV fund were adequate to cover the cost of replanting the burned area. The following Spring we hired a planting crew and completed planting. In less than 12 months, the area was returning to productivity.

Today, it would be difficult to complete the environmental assessment process within a year. If there were appeals, and there routinely are on salvage sales, the project might be delayed for another logging season. By that time, the fire-killed ponderosa pine timber would have deteriorated to the point that it might not be saleable. The Forest would be left with a sea of snags, a long term fire hazard, and no money to restore a functioning forest. In that scenario, there is little reason for the local employees to feel pride in their accomplishments.

Because retirees recognize the difficulties that current employees encounter in caring for our forests, we have set up a program to recognize people or units who are successful in finding their way through the morass of paperwork, gaining public support, and getting good work accomplished on the ground. Let me tell you about a couple of projects we have recognized.

Hurricane Katrina did severe damage to the forests along the Gulf Coast. Thousands of acres of trees were blown down, blocking roads, damaging facilities, and threatening endangered species habitat. The jackstrawed, down and broken trees posed a severe risk of insect epidemic and the potential for catastrophic fires as the down trees dried out. National Forest lands immediately adjacent to Biloxi, Mississippi were among the most severely damaged. When the winds died down, Forest Service employees immediately began to open roads.

They worked effectively with local groups to develop plans for clearing trails, rehabilitating campgrounds and other facilities. After surveys for endangered species, they made provision for protecting their habitat and quickly sold the damaged trees. The damaged trees were promptly harvested. The threat of insects and fire was removed. Within an incredibly short time, the land was restored to a productive functioning condition. I had the opportunity to meet many of the employees when I presented the John R. McGuire Award in Jackson, Mississippi. Cooperating agencies, local interest groups, and representatives of the entire Mississippi congressional delegation participated. I can tell you that the sense of pride and accomplishment was palpable. Morale was high.

Last year I presented an award to the Enoree Ranger District in South Carolina. The District has put together a large partnership organization in order to carry out a wildlife habitat improvement project that extends across ownership boundaries to include both public and private lands. A multitude of partners is involved. The pride of accomplishment among the public and private partners was apparent. Morale on this unit was not an issue.

Of course, there are many more success stories out there, but there are also many stories of frustration where well meaning people have been unable to overcome obstacles in a timely fashion. All too often projects are frustrated or settled for less than their full potential.

What can be done?

- Restore a level of funding to the agency that is commensurate with the work that needs to be done.
- Look carefully at the procedural requirements for implementing projects so that worth while projects can be accomplished in a timely manner
- Consider providing a threshold that must be met before providing an appeal right to people who have not taken advantage of opportunities to actively participate in project development.

The Forest Service has a long tradition of professional, career leadership. This has served the agency well. It helps to ensure that the Congress and the Administration have the benefit of professional advice on resource management issues that is not colored by political considerations. We urge that the tradition of professional, career leadership of the agency be continued.

If the dedicated employees of the Forest Service have a reasonable measure of job security and the resources they need to provide proper stewardship of our National Forests, to do Research, to implement the State and Private Forestry Program, and the International Forestry program, morale will not be an issue in the agency.