

**Testimony of Ron Thatcher, President  
National Federation of Federal Employees' Forest Service Council**

**Before the**

**House Committee on Natural Resources  
Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, & Public Lands**

**Regarding**

**Restoring the Federal Public Lands Workforce**

**March 19, 2009**

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to submit the following testimony.

My name is Ron Thatcher. I serve as the President of the National Federation of Federal Employees' Forest Service Council (NFFE-FSC). In this capacity, I am honored to represent approximately 20,000 dedicated public servants committed to the professional and ethical management of the 192 million acre National Forest System.

Today's topic is broad: issues related to the morale and effectiveness of Forest Service employees. Our treatment of this topic here today will be far from comprehensive. If this is to be the final word on the topic, then we will accomplish little. However, we hope this testimony will begin a dialog on how to restore both the capacity of the agency and the pride and confidence of its employees.

It is widely understood that low morale adversely affects effectiveness. The converse, that an employee's effectiveness affects his/her morale, is also true. Forest Service employees are among the most dedicated in the federal workforce – we care deeply about the agency's land management mission. Historically, the agency has been a wonderful employer and national forests have been a great place to work. Employees didn't get rich on a Forest Service salary, but took great satisfaction in doing a job they loved and that served the needs of the American people. It is in this same dedication that today's morale problems have their roots. Over and over, I hear from front line employees that one of the biggest reasons for their low morale is frustration at the imposition of barrier after barrier to their ability to accomplish their work.

Sadly, too many employees have lost the hope and belief that things can get better. They have lost faith in the distant and unseen leaders of our agency, our department, our government. Such employees can become cynical and disengaged, further eroding productivity. Some even hang it up by retiring earlier than they had planned, ending their careers because they are no longer able

to tolerate the frustration of trying to do their jobs with their hands tied behind their backs. But many more believe as I do that the time is right for a renewal of our once-proud agency. It is with this optimism that I come to tell you about the challenges we continue to face and to offer suggestions about how they can be overcome.

### **Erosion of the Land Management Workforce by Diversion of Funds to Fire Suppression**

One big issue is the steady erosion of the land management workforce. This affects not only today's capacity, but also bodes ill for the future. Due to the shrinking budgets on the land management side of the agency, many positions vacated as a result of retirements have gone unfilled. Employees are being stretched beyond their limits as they are asked to perform the work of several positions. In addition, succession planning has largely fallen by the wayside. Succession planning is critical in a land management organization because the knowledge needed to manage the land and resources is a site-specific understanding must be gained from on-the-ground experience, but unfortunately mentors with this irreplaceable knowledge are leaving before they can transfer it. We need to reverse this trend immediately.

This workforce erosion is not the result of an intentional policy change, but is rather a failure to adjust policy to deal with on-the-ground realities. Fire suppression costs exceeded one billion dollars in six of the last nine years and are trending steeply upward. Increasing costs of wildfire suppression erodes funding for other land management work in two ways.

First, funds are committed to manage wildfires based on the 10-year average of suppression costs. This leaves an ever smaller piece of the appropriated pie for land management. As a percentage of the agency budget, Forest Service fire management activities have risen from 13 percent in 1991 to a projected 48 percent for 2009. This diversion of resources from land management activities, including fuels reduction projects and others that could help prevent fires in the future, may be unintentional, but it is very real and very substantial.

Second, in six of the last nine years, the actual cost of wildfire suppression exceeded the budgeted amount. When this happens, the agency transfers funds remaining in other accounts to cover the ongoing emergency costs of suppression. These accounts are sometimes, but not always, repaid for this "fire borrowing." Even when they are repaid, time-sensitive work is disrupted and agreements with collaborators broken, which can result in significant cost increases or even in destroyed relationships.

To give a typical example of the cascading effects, "fire borrowing" in one case required that stand examination, in-stream fish habitat improvement, and wildlife meadow habitat improvement projects be put on hold. This delayed the planning and implementation of a large-scale NEPA document, which in turn delayed several timber sales and projects to enhance the habitat of threatened and endangered species. An entire year of work and progress was lost and the agency's standing with collaborators was adversely impacted.

Last year, this Committee reported out the FLAME Act, under which emergency national responses to catastrophic wildfires would have been funded like other national emergencies, such as hurricanes. This structural change would stabilize the funding for land management and allow

this workforce to be rebuilt. This cannot happen soon enough, as our workforce is old and we need to get new employees on board before current employees take their knowledge of the land and resources into retirement. I see that the FLAME Act was recently introduced in this Congress, for which I am very thankful. Our Council will do all we can to support this approach.

### **Initiative Shock: Cumulative Effects of Unsuccessful Changes**

Employees are frustrated by a seemingly endless stream of reorganizations and new technologies, methods, and policies that seem ill-planned and end up significantly impeding their ability to get their jobs done. Field-going employees and managers find themselves faced with an ever-increasing number of administrative tasks that were previously performed by support personnel. Any single challenge may be trivial in the grand scheme of things, but the cumulative effect can be overwhelming. It is this cumulative effect that has caused many employees to suffer from “initiative shock.”

One source of increased administrative tasks comes from the “burden shift” associated with recent reorganizations of agency support functions. Historically, these support organizations were maintained by field units. Resources were shared using a “zone” concept when local or regional managers decided this was beneficial. Support personnel reported to local line officers. In response to a presidential mandate, supposedly to increase efficiency, the Forest Service Washington Office assumed administrative and budgetary control of most of these administrative functions by standing up new stovepipe organizations. In these organizations, employees now report through a chain of command isolated from the field, directly connected to Washington. In total, nearly 4,000 employees, or roughly 10 percent of the workforce, were directly affected by these reorganizations. Field employees no longer have local staff to consult, but call an 800 number for support. The following reorganizations were implemented between 2005 and 2007:

- Information Technology (IT) support was downsized as a result of competitive sourcing. Personnel were not physically centralized, but were stationed at various field locations. However, they reported through the chain of command of their virtual IT organization.
- Human Capital Management (HCM) was downsized and centralized by Business Process Reengineering (BPR). Although the competitive sourcing process *per se* was not used, the project was undertaken for the stated purpose of meeting the quota associated with this presidential initiative. HCM employees were directly reassigned to the Albuquerque Service Center (ASC is sometimes called “Washington Office West”).
- Agency Budget and Fiscal (B&F) operations were also downsized and centralized by BPR. It is our understanding that this centralization was mandated by the Department; credit toward the agency’s competitive sourcing quota was also sought. Employees were directly reassigned to ASC.

As these organizations were stood up, employees with managerial, land management, and other duties found themselves saddled with work previously provided by support personnel. When IT support was downsized, some tasks were intentionally assigned to users, while others were inadvertently left out of the new organization’s responsibilities and had to be picked up by other staff. When Human Capital Management (HCM) was downsized and centralized, part of the plan involved a “self service” model in which “line staff will be required to redeem some managerial

functions that they are not currently performing in order to... reduce the costs of the [HCM] function.”

In addition, a number of computer-based business applications have been released in rapid succession without adequate testing. In many cases, these systems have been mandated from above, for example by the Department. In other cases, they are agency-sponsored packages designed to provide stop-gap coverage of critical processes that cannot be performed by non-functional Departmental-sponsored software. There are literally dozens of applications, most of which are problematic and some of which are all but dysfunctional. Difficulties with the poor user interfaces and questionable functionalities of these applications are exacerbated by the lack of field administrative support personnel who have historically handled these processing tasks.

Self-service and phone helpdesk support are particularly frustrating and ineffective for field-going employees. I strongly encourage the reading of the most thoughtful and comprehensive accounts, including a letter to the Forest Service National Leadership Team signed by 37 District Rangers, which are provided in their entirety in exhibits 1-4 attached to this testimony. The following are some additional employee comments, obtained within the last month:

“Burden shift due not only to the HR centralization but other functions such as B&F and the Computer Technologies has greatly reduced my efficiency to do my job... I now spend much more time learning these other functions and performing these tasks before I can do my own tasks. Tasks such as loading computer software and troubleshooting errors, programming funds, managing credit cards, as well as numerous other time consuming tasks eat away from my productivity with the job I was hired to perform. Not to mention that there really isn't any type of training for many of these tasks - some B&F background would help to figure out how to perform B&F type functions but often there isn't anybody left on the forest to ask for help. I just feel that we have been spread too thin and expected to know too many fields to be effective at our own jobs.”

“In July 2007, I opened a case with HCM to see how many days of military leave I had. I have to track that manually since Paycheck program does not track it automatically... I was unable to get any answers from HCM. In December of 2007, I opened up a Merit Board Protection case. I gathered from my conversation with the merit board person that I was not the first one to call them up. They (Merit Board) called HCM on January 21, 2008 and one week later, I had my leave audit. It is too bad I had to complain to get such a simple item done.”

“I tried to start the hiring process for a dispatcher in February 2008... The job finally came out and closed in early December. I selected my candidate 5 weeks ago; she has been contacted by ASC; however ASC can not tell me if she will be able to report to work on March 16<sup>th</sup>... We have seen letters recognizing that centralization of HR did not work, but to give it more time. How about this, IT IS NOT WORKING>>>>>FIX IT. When are they going to call uncle and go back to the way it was, when people were there to assist you, instead of saying call the 1-800 number and see if they can help you. There is no personal contact with the field, they have no clue the time and energy it takes for supervisors the hire their crews now. It is ridiculous how much time it takes to get things done.”

“I had 8 STEPs [student temporary education program employees] that I did resignation 52s for at the end of the season. At least 5 of these 52s which were done in August 2008 were not completed till February 2009. Some of these students had lump sum payments due to them... No one seems to be able to correct our leave errors... Needless to say my interaction with ASC has not been very productive. My work load has doubled since the reorganization and my expectations of success have plummeted. This move to consolidation is an illusion of progress producing only confusion, inefficiency and demoralization.”

“Prior to ASC each Forest had a Payroll Clerk who had the ability to correct leave errors. That ability was taken away and [now] we constantly have leave errors with no way of correcting them. Each leave error costs our Forest (a fee is charged by the National Finance Center (NFC)) and those fees are adding up because we can't get the errors fixed in a timely manner. We maintain leave audits on our units but by the time an audit is sent to ASC for a correction, another pay period has elapsed and, even if ASC fixes the problem, it is already incorrect because the employee has accrued more leave; this in turn causes another error.”

“Employees all over the country are doing Windows XP retrofits [to upgrade computer operating systems]. At my GS-11/Step 10 salary I have spent 6-plus hours on the install, and I just hit an error so I will have to restart it tomorrow.”

“(1) I have an employee that for 6 weeks has been trying to get his Lotus Notes [employee email and time and attendance program] fixed. He is a field going employee. He is currently sitting by a phone (instead of out in the field doing his job) waiting for someone from the help desk to finally call him back. He has been playing phone tag for several days with the help desk... (2) I have an employee that has been trying to get his computer login fixed with a new password for over 6 weeks. Phone calls are not returned and neither are emails. When the mandatory Aglearn training is then not completed [due to a lack of system access], the forest supervisor threatens employees with letters in their files... (3) I had another employee who had some weird error message that resulted in training that was completed showing as incomplete, he also had the same issue with the help desk and was also threatened with a letter... (4) My battalion chief spent a day and half upgrading his computer to Windows XP and then when the migration did not work correctly had to call the help desk. I have better things for him to do than be a computer expert. He could have spent that time working on agreements with the local volunteer fire departments.”

“I spent 16 hours in February on the phone with the PC helpdesk folks – both times because my profile as a FS employee was mysteriously dumped. I would venture a guess that 10 hours a month is about average for me to have to devote to fixing computer problems... Meanwhile, out on the logging job, I'm not there. My position requires that I be readily available in the area of current operations. If a contractor were forced to stay away from the field, he has to have an alternate representative on the site or be in breach of contract. The same is required of us. I have no alternate. Therefore, when I am absent from my duties in the field, I am placing the government in position for breach [of contract].”

“I used GovTrip for the first time yesterday, submitting a [travel] voucher. My experience took over 2 hours and not only took up my time (as a GS-7), but also intermittently the time of a GS-9 and a GS-11. The program was very user unfriendly. What is really irritating is that we get charged extra for using their helpdesk. The contractor is essentially double-dipping. They are paid once to design and manage a travel system, and then paid again when we need help because it was so poorly designed.”

“GovTrip is crazy. We have a bunch of highly-paid scientists wasting time struggling with this ridiculous software. Talk about a waste of time. I've done some application development, and this may very well be the WORST-written application I've ever experienced. Confusing, cumbersome, doesn't use typical Windows conventions (i.e., use of the return key to accept entries in dialog boxes, etc.). Easy to make a mistake that requires re-filling in entire screens. Hard to get pricing on airlines, you can try selecting the same exact flight 5 times and get 4 or 5 different fares.”

“After 3 hours creating the initial authorization thru GovTrip, I spent over 4 hours of my time attempting to finalize a travel voucher today. I am a field going employee, but not today. My pay level is GS-9 plus steps. I am not technologically challenged, the travel system just is not working well – it kicks you out before your voucher is completed.”

I want to emphasize that these comments should not be taken to reflect poorly on employees laboring in the stovepipe administrative support organizations, who are doing the best they can in untenable and extremely stressful situations. The problem lies elsewhere – in the organization, tools, training, etc. available to them. For example, the vast majority of the agency's human resource employees retired, resigned, or transferred to other jobs when faced with directed reassignment to the ASC – taking their years of training and experience with them. This dramatic loss of human capital meant that crucial mentoring could not take place. It takes people to transmit a corporate culture – and the needed people did not come along for the ride.

I have another perspective to share on this point. It involves an IT employee. IT employees are required to focus on meeting Service Level Agreements (SLAs) and are ordered to turn away projects that may be important to the local units where they are stationed, work they previously would have routinely performed, if it is outside the scope of work of the IT organization. This fragmentation adversely affects the morale of both non-IT employees whose needs are not met and IT employees prevented by the organization from meeting those needs. One IT employee reports an old friend he ran into was surprised he was still working at the local unit because local management had said that he “no longer works for us.” This employee, like too many others, has been reorganized from a “can-do” member of the Forest Service team to an isolated, alienated employee who “can't.” He told me he had been devastated by his new situation and planned to retire as soon as he could.

As troubling as these inefficiencies are, the centralization and stovepiping, particularly of HCM, have raised more profound issues. Employees at all levels report the occurrence of a shift of power and authority, perhaps unintended but nevertheless real, away from the field to HCM. Field supervisors retain responsibility for program delivery, but the authority they need has been

taken from them. As one employee noted, HCM is supposed to be a support function, but has become “the tail that wags the dog.” The following quotes address this issue:

Employee and union official, “ASC is making their own policy ... Our Forest Supervisor was just as unsuccessful as the rest of us when she tries to solve problems. It’s like they created a kingdom that answers to nobody.”

Employee and union official, “Nowadays I get called into the Forest Supervisor's office more to help him try to figure out angles to get around ASC-HCM than I do for any sort of disciplinary action or anything else.”

Employee and union official, “There is no experience in those centers. All the experience was left in the field doing other jobs or gone when employees retired or resigned. We lost a lot of good and experienced employees from this. The service centers are hiring people right off the streets in Albuquerque to replace long-time experienced employees. They are hiring people who have never worked for the Government or been on a Forest, but who are making decisions that affect us at the Forest and District level not understanding how it will affect us.”

37 District Rangers, “While we have retained the responsibility for land management and public service, we have lost significant authority to meet these responsibilities. We are concerned that recent changes have resulted in line officers at all levels ceding power to those in support functions.” (See Exhibit 1 for entire letter.)

17 Forest Supervisors, “Line officers from multiple regions relate incidences time after time where HCM employees appear to be stepping into what traditionally was a line officer’s role and going beyond their technical delegation ... As our organization centralizes various functions at the national, regional, and sub-regional level, it is becoming increasingly difficult for line officers to redeem their many various responsibilities. The agency is increasingly separating accountability to accomplish the mission of the National Forest System from the authority to accomplish that mission. This trend is having a significant impact on line officers’ ability to achieve mission-critical outcomes.”

### **Reclassification of Fire Managers**

Finally, I need to mention some of the unique issues faced by our firefighters. This portion of our workforce is substantial and plays a key role: the Forest Service is the lead agency in wildfire suppression. Firefighter issues are many and complex, as is the workforce that fights wildfire. This workforce encompasses employees largely or solely dedicated to fire duties, such as the many firefighters in Region 5, and militia members who normally perform non-fire work and fulfill various firefighting and support functions on incidents as collateral duties. One-size-fits-all solutions are unlikely to be effective for this range of situations.

There are a number of issues affecting the effectiveness and morale of our firefighters – many more than I can begin to summarize here. Just to name a few, there’s issues of proper classification, roles and responsibilities of fire managers and non-fire agency administrators, pay

and personnel policy reforms to improve retention in Region 5, temporary hiring practices, succession planning, waning cultural support and incentives for participation in the militia, and over-reliance on contract resources. However, I do need to mention one issue that represents a clear and present danger to the safety and effectiveness of our firefighting workforce, and that is the reclassification of fire managers into the GS-0401 series. The knowledge, skills, and abilities to lead a fire crew into harm's way are not obtained in a classroom – they are obtained by specialized agency-developed training and on-the-ground experience. The reclassification imposes new academic requirements which in many cases are unrelated to the duties of these positions. Based on the most recent numbers we have seen, this may remove as many as 31 percent of the agency's 473 field generals in our war against wildfire from their jobs next year. Further, the reclassification imposes a glass ceiling for some of our most capable leaders coming up through the ranks (see Exhibit 5), but effects on succession planning have been ignored.

The situation is essentially unchanged since I testified about this issue before the Senate Committee on Natural Resources on June 18, 2008 (the testimony is available at <http://energy.senate.gov/public/files/ThatcherTestimony.doc>). Last year, as a result of Congressional inquiries, the agency made a number of commitments to mitigate the adverse impacts of this reclassification. Most, if not all, of these commitments have been broken. An Office of Inspector General (OIG) management alert has been issued on this and the agency claims to have “stood down” its transition to the GS-0401 series. However, in reality the transition is proceeding unabated. Critical fire management positions continue to be filled from applicant pools skewed away from vital field experience toward largely irrelevant academic degrees. Limited funds continue to be diverted from needed training to pay for coursework that is unrelated to fire management. Fire management capacity continues to erode every day the agency continues this misguided policy.

### **How We Got Here: Top-Down Management without Field Input**

So, how did we get to this point? In each and every failed initiative, we hear the same complaint: leadership didn't ask the field. The initiatives were developed and imposed on employees from on high without field employee input.

The decision to stovepipe and downsize IT support came from the President of the United States. The Bush administration's competitive sourcing initiative was the ultimate top-down, non-collaborative management style. It sought to put all commercial work performed by Federal agencies up for bid. The theory was that agencies would either downsize staff to avoid outsourcing this work or all of it would go to the lowest private sector bidder. The process was regulated by the White House Office of Management and Budget (OMB) Circular No. A-76. OMB assigned agencies quotas of fulltime equivalents (FTEs, or jobs) to submit to the A-76 process. The competitive sourcing initiative, especially as implemented by the Forest Service (see <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d08195.pdf>) has since been largely discredited; however, it left behind a legacy of eroded infrastructure and low employee morale.

There are many flaws to the competitive sourcing initiative, but perhaps the most important was its fragmented approach. By design, it failed to look at the entire agency holistically. Instead, staffing and outsourcing decisions were made based solely on cost comparisons of work

functions considered in isolation. Strategic considerations are beyond the scope of the A-76 Circular – and the fatal flaw of competitive sourcing was that its quotas took this discretion away from agency leaders as well. In addition, because of the secrecy required by this procurement-sensitive process, employees could not be meaningfully and productively engaged but by design were excluded and kept in the dark. The outcomes caused by this initiative – as well as employees’ sense of powerlessness and betrayal – have had lasting impacts.

Although not a result of competitive sourcing *per se*, the BPR of HCM was undertaken as an alternative *in lieu* of an A-76 public-private competition. The responsibility for top-down decision-making that excluded employees in this case also rests with the previous administration. As in competitive sourcing, the efficiency and cost effectiveness of Forest Service operations as a whole were not considered. Centralization and downsizing were preordained outcomes.

The most troubling deployments of business application software have been mandated by the Department or by even higher levels of the government. Examples include GovTrip and EmpowHR, the backbone application for HCM self-service. The implementation timetables mandated from on high for these and other applications prevented adequate testing. Testing and feedback on the functionality of new systems by pilot groups is among the most basic of ways to engage employees – and there can be no doubt it results in better data and better decisions. In this case, as in those mandated by competitive sourcing, we include our agency leadership among the employees excluded from the decision-making process – Department mandates and timetables apparently left them no authority to perform the testing that would have been prudent.

The decision to reclassify fire managers is the only issue I’ve discussed that is an agency decision. However, decision-makers have elected to exclude employees, even the agency’s top field managers with decades of experience, from the decision-making process. There are many bright, dedicated, and concerned individuals in the Fire and Aviation Management organization; however, an unfortunate culture of secrecy and top-down decision-making seems to have developed in the organization, at least as displayed in this instance.

### **A Better Approach: Engage the Workforce**

I have no magic bullet, no simple solution to fix these problems. A few union leaders are no more infallible than are a few agency leaders. But I would like to suggest a strategy that would immediately begin to improve morale and put us on a pathway to increase our effectiveness.

We submit that front-line employees are the ones who know the best way to get their jobs done. It is they who have the best understanding of the barriers that block their way on a daily basis. It is they who have the best understanding of how to improve the processes with which they work every day. It is they who know what needs to be done to increase their effectiveness. We believe it is crucial to tap into the collective wisdom of the workforce. This is particularly true of the Forest Service, an institution in which one size cannot be assumed to fit all because of the diversity of lands, from Alaska to Alabama, for which the agency is responsible.

We need a process to meaningfully engage employees so their collective knowledge and wisdom may be brought to bear on agency challenges. Such a process is available. Content analysis was developed by Forest Service employees to compile, organize, and analyze public comments pursuant to National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) requirements. Chairman Rahall's new agenda for the Natural Resources Committee includes a renewed commitment to require the federal government to "think before it acts... by requiring solicitation of public opinion and consideration of alternatives," using methods such as content analysis. We propose that the Forest Service engage its workforce regarding internal reorganizations, implementation of new technologies, etc. in a similar fashion and for the same reasons: to ensure the agency thinks before it acts. We believe the process can be streamlined and used to great advantage to compile the collective knowledge of employees and managers in the field.

A top priority must be taking action to win back the trust and respect of the workforce. For far too long, employees have been kept in the dark and misled by their leaders. This has had an effect on morale that is even more devastating than the challenges themselves – the thought that our leaders would substitute propaganda for truth is really devastating to a dedicated employee committed to the work of the agency. Even though the ultimate responsibility for this has often been at levels of the government above the agency and therefore beyond the control of agency leadership, it still falls to that leadership to address the effects on morale this unfortunate era has left in its wake. Recently, President Obama said on national television, "I screwed up." Our agency leadership needs to follow his example and bring the same level of accountability back to that part of the American government for which they are responsible, the Forest Service. Straight talk about what has not worked – about our failures – is needed to restore the trust and credibility that are so important to effective leadership. We agree wholeheartedly with the Dialogos report recommendation that "top leaders must then honestly communicate the realities ... to all relevant audiences in the organization, and engage in an open strategic conversation with the organization's distributed leadership and employees." For example, leadership needs to start talking straight to our employees by telling them:

- The savings of the IT reorganization were overstated for political reasons, because accounting guidance mandated by the White House Office of Management and Budget was misleading (see <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d08195.pdf>). IT employees have shouldered a heavy load and performed admirably, but the business models and standards developed by the secretive and fragmented competitive sourcing process have ill-served the needs of many field-going employees.
- The Forest Service has had to experience the unintended operational impacts and the cultural/emotional pain of a failing implementation of centralized HCM services for over 2 years. We need to revisit the fundamental assumptions associated with self-service. We need to determine what level of HCM resources in the field best serves the agency's needs.

I'm happy to report some recent developments that are quite encouraging. A reorganization team is looking at the IT organization. This team got off to a shaky start. For example, management insisted on secrecy during the development of the initial plan, even requiring our union representative to sign a nondisclosure agreement. This was not the best way to begin with employees who already have "reorganization fatigue" and a lack of trust because of their painful experience with competitive sourcing. Further, employees had serious concerns about the draft

plan that was released for employee review and comments. There was great concern that the draft plan did away with virtual positions in favor of a centralized service center. In addition, this plan did not appear responsive to recommendations of the CIO Technology Program Review, which assessed the IT support organization model and called for more “boots on the ground.”

However, the reorganization team solicited employee comments on the draft plan and, more significantly, compiled them using a content analysis process. More significantly still, they appear to be seriously considering the comments and are reporting back to employees in a timely fashion with the results of their analysis and some preliminary decisions. This is significant because there is a history of comments being solicited and then disappearing, never to be seen again. The team deserves a lot of credit for taking this step. It is our hope it is one small step on the path to a new way of doing business. I need to mention as well that in spite of this being a particularly battered and bruised staff, as they have only recently emerged from competitive sourcing, roughly 35-40% of them took the time to comment. Under the circumstances, this is an excellent response rate, and it indicates that employees, for their part, are ready to engage in a productive way, if only leadership will open the door and honestly consider their input.

The situation with HCM is less promising. In spite of dire internal assessments, leadership has yet to be completely straight with the workforce. Two teams were recently chartered to work on HCM problems, one to deal with urgent operational priorities (crisis management) and the other to deal with strategic issues, such as the business model itself. These are positive steps in the right direction; however, these are not the first teams to be chartered and dispatched since we transitioned to the new HCM organization. We need a bigger effort. We need a transparent process to engage the workforce. This would not only put more heads together to work on the problem, it would also go a long way toward restoring trust and morale by sending a message that leadership understands the magnitude of the problem – and that they understand our workforce is a valuable resource to help solve it. It would be just as important for leadership as for rank and file employees, for they, too, are battered by “initiative shock” and need the help.

The situation with the reclassification of fire managers is as bad as can be. Officials responsible for the policy are not communicating with the field, not even to provide adequate guidance for implementing the decisions they have made behind closed doors, and have refused to discuss the matter with the union. Although this story is complex and fraught with twists and turns, the bottom line is the decision to transition these positions to the GS-0401 series was announced on June 15, 2004, yet many employees have still not been informed of how to meet the new standard in order to keep the jobs they have successfully performed for years (see Exhibit 5). The disregard for employees in these positions, not to mention the safety and effectiveness of the wildfire operations they lead, has had a large negative effect on morale. Field employees, including managers, feel disconnected and ignored by national leadership.

## **Conclusion**

I have shown here today how sweeping agency changes based on decisions made in secret without employee input by isolated officials who are not held accountable for their decisions have been disastrous. This way of doing business has not served the needs of the agency at all well. A new way is needed. The knowledge employees have about their jobs is knowledge that

agency officials need in order to make the best decisions about the organizations, means, and methods of getting those jobs done. Employees need to be engaged, as advisors, even as collaborators, if the best decisions are to be made.

This new way of doing business will require officials who have grown accustomed to the top-down, secretive mode of operations of the old administration to abandon these habits. It will require them to embrace the principles of transparency and accountability articulated by President Obama. The payoff is in shared accountability and shared ownership – a decision informed by better information and a workforce motivated to make the decision work.

We recommend the following legislation to encourage this way of doing business:

- Reintroduce and pass the Federal Labor-Management Partnership Act as introduced in the 110<sup>th</sup> Congress (HR 3892). As found by Congress, the right of employees to participate in the agency decision-making process through unions “contributes to the effective conduct of public business.” This legislation would establish labor-management partnership committees whose express purpose would be “to better serve the public and carry out the mission of the agency.” The Forest Service has such a committee, and while its influence is limited it is still an institution that provides an important avenue for employee participation. In addition, this legislation would also enable unions to negotiate on organizational matters and on methods and means of performing work – the very matters in which, as I hope I have shown here today, employee participation is critical.
- Pass the Whistleblower Protection Enhancement Act of 2009 (HR 1507). This legislation would strengthen protections against acts of reprisal which employees all too often face as a result of their disclosures of problems that their superiors would prefer remain hidden from Congress and the American people. This legislation would encourage the kind of transparency and accountability that is required for meaningful employee participation in agency decision-making.

These bills would put an “accountability infrastructure” in place that would allow us to collaborate with agency officials to develop and use methods that are appropriate for the diverse specific problems we will face. For example, though we have spoken highly of content analysis, we have not asked for legislation to mandate the use of this method for all reorganizations. This tool, while powerful, may not be appropriate in all cases. Instead, we seek a statutory framework within which we may, in collaboration with agency officials, develop our own best practices.

In addition to these legislative items, your continued engagement and oversight on these issues is important. As I’ve discussed, they are of critical importance and are currently at high risk for catastrophic failure. Even with perfect legislation in place, I’m sure we’ll need to continue to bring specific concerns to your attention on a case-by-case basis. In any organization as large and complex as a federal agency, there will always be pockets of resistance to change. Old habits die hard. For now, we urge you to remain engaged on the issues we have discussed here today and to pressure the agency to take meaningful action to address them. We would be happy and honored to help you in any way that we can.

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, this concludes my prepared statement. Thank you for the opportunity. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have at this time. In

addition, please contact us at any time with any addition questions or requests for information. I may be reached at [rthatcher@fs.fed.us](mailto:rthatcher@fs.fed.us) and our Legislative Director, Mark Davis, may be reached at [mwdavis01@fs.fed.us](mailto:mwdavis01@fs.fed.us).

## **Exhibit 1, Accompanying Testimony of Ron Thatcher, NFFE-FSC**

### **Restoring the Federal Public Lands Workforce**

**March 19, 2009**

*The following is a letter from 37 District Rangers, the agency's front-line supervisors, to the National Leadership Team. We are aware of no response from the Leadership Team.*

May 29, 2008

TO: Members of the Forest Service National Leadership Team

#### **A FIELD PERSPECTIVE**

We recently completed a Rocky Mountain regional district ranger meeting to discuss common issues facing us at the field level. This letter summarizes some of the concerns we discussed. It is intended to be constructive, and aims to provide solutions to these concerns. We respectfully ask for your consideration and offer our support in solving these issues.

The district rangers overwhelmingly support some recent changes made at the national level. This includes the decision to have the Human Resource Liaisons assigned to local line officers and the decision to not "stovepipe" the AQM organization. We appreciate your efforts and your support of the Dialogos report's recognition of the benefit of "straight talk". We also understand that the National Leadership team (NLT) has been reconfigured. The NLT is now smaller and focused on strategic decisions. Given this recent change, and the NLT's enhanced role in decision making, we decided to send this letter to the entire NLT.

As district rangers we feel that, while we have retained the responsibility for land management and public service, we have lost significant authority to meet these responsibilities. We are concerned that recent changes have resulted in line officers at all levels ceding power to those in support functions. The Dialogos report identified this phenomenon. An aspect of this issue was highlighted in the March 27, 2008, letter from the R6 Forest Supervisors to the Acting Regional Forester, regarding the current role of line officers in employment authority.

As an agency, we have become more process oriented and less mission oriented. Business functions currently hinder operations, with people becoming distracted by the additional workload and the frustration of being unable to make progress. Individually these additional tasks and new processes are manageable; cumulatively they have become a huge burden on an already stressed workforce. Our workforce feels overloaded with new processes and frustrated by a burden shift of administrative duties with less time to focus their efforts on mission-critical work. The connection between land managers and administrative support used to be clear and immediate with success measured by the ability to provide service to mission-critical work. The connection between the two groups has become strained and in some cases is completely severed.

The district ranger job has always involved "kicking rocks out of the way" so that our staff could get work done. Lately, it has been difficult to acquire and to share current and useful information with our employees, let alone help them when they hit a roadblock. Often we do not

even know who to talk to in order to resolve issues, nor does it seem we have the authority needed to set priorities or resolve issues. The past year has been especially difficult for districts as it regards human resource support. We have not been able to hire the people we need, sometimes have not gotten employees paid on time, and the summer seasonal hiring process has been stressful at best. This is not intended as criticism for the hard working employees at HCM trying to make the system work. And we do recognize that new efforts are being made to correct the situation.

We suggest that administrative services and processes be better focused on the needs of the field. Sometimes our expressed concerns regarding process/organization changes either have been ignored or treated as if we were simply resisting change. We want to be clear here. We embrace change as necessary to keep the Forest Service relevant, efficient and effective. We do not ask for a return to historic processes, but instead ask that we better focus, plan, and execute needed changes.

We have observed a trend toward a more “top-down” agency with less involvement from the field, and lacking adequate feedback mechanisms. The effect is that ranger districts sometimes feel alienated, creating a “we/they” dynamic. We recognize the importance of strong central leadership and direction, but we cannot have mission alignment without field involvement. Lack of field representation during the formulation and development of programs that have so profoundly restructured key branches of the agency has resulted in design and execution problems that have negatively impacted mission delivery.

Initiatives are important to an organization in setting priorities and making needed changes. Having too many initiatives, however, can divert attention away from mission-critical work and dilute the agency’s focus. The Dialogos report also highlights this issue as “initiative fatigue”. We suggest that our most important initiative is fixing a broken service delivery system as it hinders our ability to address emphasis items and assigned targets.

We have reviewed summaries of the Dialogos report and believe that our concerns are echoed to some degree in that report. We will continue to have difficulty maintaining mission focus and attention to safety if we can’t resolve issues in those processes that were traditionally taken for granted. The sooner we can stabilize these issues the sooner we may focus on our primary mission and the safety of our workforce.

## **Recommendations**

To quote Colin Powell on leadership, *“The day soldiers stop bringing you their problems is the day you have stopped leading them. They have either lost confidence that you can help them or concluded that you do not care. Either case is a failure of leadership”*. We believe that you can solve these problems and that you care.

As you address the many issues facing the agency, we respectfully request consideration of the following:

- Clarify the roles, responsibilities and authorities throughout the agency in light of changes and centralization of various functions.
- Re-establish line authority over support functions. Recognize that you cannot hold line accountable if they do not have the authority.
- Focus your efforts (be visible) on improving administrative service support throughout the agency. We believe this is the most important thing you can do to support the ranger districts.
- Adequately test new software and systems and ensure they are working properly before being extended on an agency-wide basis.
- Ensure ranger districts are well represented in the development of processes, organizations and services essential to meeting the mission. Include significant ranger district involvement (SSS's, Staff, District Rangers) in addressing the current problems in Human Resources.
- Be careful in starting new initiatives prior to ensuring that the old ones are working as intended. Focus on making our systems work to support the organization.

We stand ready to assist you in addressing these challenges and issues!

Sincerely,

/s/Robert Thompson  
Hickenbottom  
Robert Thompson  
Black Hills NF

/s/ Oscar Martinez  
Oscar Martinez  
Medicine Bow-Routt NF  
& Thunder Basin NG

/s/Randy  
Randy Hickenbottom  
Pike-San Isabel NF  
& Cimarron-Comanche NG

/s/Daniel Lovato  
Daniel Lovato  
Arapaho-Roosevelt NF  
& Pawnee NG

/s/ Tony DeToy  
Tony DeToy  
Nebraska-Samuel R.  
McKelvie NF, Buffalo  
Gap-Fort Pierre-Oglala NG

/s/SteveKozel  
Steve Kozel  
Black Hills NF

/s/ Misty Hayes  
Misty Hayes  
Medicine Bow-Routt NF  
& Thunder Basin NG

/s/Mike McNeill  
Mike McNeill  
Nebraska-Samuel R  
McKelvie NF, Buffalo  
Gap-Fort Pierre-Oglala NG

/s/Joe Hartman  
Joe Hartman  
Pike-San Isabel NF  
Cimarron & Comanche NG

/s/Richard Gilbert  
Morrisey  
Richard Gilbert  
Nebraska-Samuel R.  
McKelvie NF, Buffalo  
Gap-Fort Pierre-Oglala NG

/s/Connie Clementson  
Connie Clementson  
Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre  
& Gunnison NF

/s/Jon  
Jon Morrisey  
Pike-San Isabel NF  
Cimarron & Comanche NG

/s/Robert Sprentall

/s/Michael Lloyd

/s/Terry Root

Robert Sprentall  
Medicine Bow-Routt NF  
& Thunder Basin NG  
/s/Charles Marsh  
Charlie Marsh  
Nebraska-Samuel R.  
McKelvie NF, Buffalo  
Gap-Fort Pierre-Oglala NG

Michael Lloyd  
Black Hills NF

/s/Mark Booth  
Mark Booth  
Bighorn NF

Terry Root  
Shoshone NF

/s/Rhonda O'Byrne  
Rhonda O'Byrne  
Black Hills NF

/s/Kevin Atchley  
Kevin Atchley  
Nebraska-Samuel R.  
McKelvie NF, Buffalo  
Gap-Fort Pierre-Oglala NG

/s/Patricia Barney  
Patricia Barney  
Nebraska-Samuel R.  
McKelvie NF, Buffalo  
Gap-Fort Pierre-Oglala NG

/s/Brent Botts  
Brent Botts  
Pike-San Isabel NF  
Cimarron & Comanche NG

/s/Bill Schuckert  
Bill Schuckert  
Pike-San Isabel NF  
Cimarron & Comanche NG

/s/Sara Mayben  
Sara Mayben  
Pike-San Isabel NF  
Cimarron & Comanche NG

/s/Christine Walsh  
Christine Walsh  
Arapaho-Roosevelt NF  
& Pawnee NG

/s/Glenn Adams  
Glenn Adams  
White River NF

/s/Jeff Stoney  
Jeff Stoney  
Pike-San Isabel NF  
Cimarron & Comanche NG

/s/Levi Broyles  
Levi Broyles  
Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre  
& Gunnison NF

/s/Rick Metzger  
Archuleta  
Rick Metzger  
Shoshone NF

/s/Ruth Esperance  
Ruth Esperance  
Shoshone NF

/s/Andrew  
Andrew Archuleta  
Rio Grande NF

/s/Stephen Best  
Kingsbury  
Stephen Best  
Medicine Bow-Routt NF  
& Thunder Basin NG

/s/James Dawson  
James Dawson  
Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre  
& Gunnison NF

/s/Jamie  
Jamie Kingsbury  
Medicine Bow-Routt NF  
& Thunder Basin NG

/s/Clarke McClung  
Crespin  
Clarke McClung  
Bighorn NF

/s/Judy Schutza  
Judy Schutza  
Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre  
& Gunnison NF

/s/Paul  
Paul Crespin  
Pike-San Isabel NF  
Cimarron & Comanche NG

/s/Scott Ludwig  
Scott Ludwig  
White River NF

## **Exhibit 2, Accompanying Testimony of Ron Thatcher, NFFE-FSC**

### **Restoring the Federal Public Lands Workforce**

**March 19, 2009**

*The following is an email from a Fire Crew Supervisor, received on Feb. 27, 2009 in response to the Council's solicitation of employee comments on workforce morale and effectiveness.*

I am no longer a member of the union, but I supervise 18 union employees. The centralization of HR functions has greatly impacted the morale of the Forest Service employees by degrading the quality of HR service provided to employees, and by taking valuable time and energy away from supervisors as the functions have been transferred down to inexperienced supervisors.

I routinely have issues in every facet of HR process. The hiring process (AVUE) is confusing for applicants and was shut down during a critical hiring period this year. Once applicants navigate the AVUE process, then they get a confusing form letter from ASC with very little direction for the Eforms they must complete online. Then they arrive on the unit and face problems with access to Agency computers because their earning statements are available only after they can Eauthenticate which takes several weeks after they have been in pay status. Many employees have issues with delayed initial pay, incorrect transfer of sick leave, and a host of other issues. As a supervisor, the worst aspect of centralization is that as bad as any individual process may be, the processes are changed so often that there is no chance to learn and work the bugs out. I spend an average of several hours each day dealing with HR services that previously were handled by dedicated HR experts on the unit that felt a stake in the success of my program. The HR folks knew the employees and took pride in taking care of them. To ASC, I am just a problem. ASC has no stake in the success of the program, and no understanding of the challenges I face. Since I am not an HR expert, I require assistance in many of the HR functions, but obtaining help is not a simple phone call away. I am still waiting on a request from last year on a hiring process question. Processes are implemented before being tested, and with limited training for supervisors. The corresponding waste of time and money is staggering.

The problems are not limited to hiring. After the seasonal were terminated for the year, they had to wait four months this year (October to February) to receive lump sum payments for their unused annual leave. That is terrible service. Other examples abound, but universally, the complexity and number of HR processes and the constant change of policies make it nearly impossible to provide employees quality service. How can we expect high employee morale when basic functions like hiring and pay cannot be effectively handled on a regular basis? The quality of service to employees is an embarrassment.

### **Exhibit 3, Accompanying Testimony of Ron Thatcher, NFFE-FSC**

#### **Restoring the Federal Public Lands Workforce**

**March 19, 2009**

*The following is an email from a Fire Crew Supervisor, received on Mar. 6, 2009 in response to the Council's solicitation of employee comments on workforce morale and effectiveness.*

I think employee morale at the field level is at the lowest I've ever seen it in my 29 years with the Forest Service. We've made it through many tight budget years, low staffing years, and constantly changing processes, but never has it taken the emotional toll it's taking now. We are too inundated with new processes/help desks/acronyms/systems. I see managers who would normally come to work, deal with office issues in the first half hour, and then take off to the woods where their real job is. They'd come back late at the end of the day tired but satisfied that they'd done what they were here to do. Now, they have a completely overloaded computer inbox to deal with, full of multiple messages from the CIO, the HRM, the HRM liaison, the Govtrip, the Aglearn.....many of them have to schedule whole days in the office to deal with all this. If the new systems and processes would happen one at a time, and work correctly and smoothly and actually be an improvement on how things were done previously, and people were allowed to absorb the new processes before moving on to the next one, things might be easier to deal with. But we have been bombarded with new processes in every area we deal with, and 99% of them have so many bugs when they're given to us to use, it's become severe process overload. People feel like there's a huge weight on their shoulders and they feel hopeless to do anything about it because it just keeps coming.

The new purchase card system is a prime example of one of these problems. We were told to start using the cards November 29, 2008. It's now March 2009 and we still haven't been able to "reconcile" or "reallocate" because they don't have the job codes and the supervisors in the system. Why weren't they in the system before we were even allowed to start using it? We had to take the training immediately, and when we finally can use the system, we won't remember it. I went in and tried to look around and had a really hard time, so I downloaded the user guide, and the user guide is full of statements like "if your organization uses such and such" or "such and such depends on your user setups and access rights", so it's not even written for the Forest Service - it's written for the world in general that uses this system. It was no help at all. So meanwhile, we can't reconcile, and all our charges are going to a default job code, which is skewing the financial statements because those charges need to be moved to where they actually belong. Another problem is the idea that the supervisor has to approve each purchase (before, they had to review a list of purchases every quarter). I'm the main office purchaser, and my supervisor is the Ranger, who is about 700 messages behind on her emails. The last thing she needs is to go in and approve each one of my purchases. I know she's not the only one with this problem. The people at the upper levels will say we just need to do a better job at managing our emails, but that's not going to change the way it is.

Govtrip is another fine example. An employee who sits next to me spent a whole day on the phone with Govtrip trying to schedule flights for a certain date from here to where his training was. The response was "there are no flights from here to there on that day". That is incomprehensible because both areas have busy airports with outgoing & incoming flights

constantly. Finally they got to the point of saying there was a flight out, but not back. And then finally they were able to find one coming back. AND, all of this was going to cost an OUTRAGEOUS amount compared to what he could get going through Expedia or Travelocity. The person on the other end of the line obviously didn't care about saving the government money. This employee talked to someone in another office who was going to the same training, and found out he got a flight in and out for \$300 less, from the same airports. So our employee called Govtrip back and told them this, and then they were able to find him one for \$200 less. In summary, not only did the employee waste a WHOLE DAY trying to get this done, when he could have spent maybe 15 minutes with Expedia or Travelocity, but he also is going to pay hundreds more for the ticket. What is the logic here???? I suppose the government wants to somehow track the travel and maybe they think Govtrip is the way to do it, but wouldn't the simple old travel voucher system do that? And the old travel voucher system was just that - a computer program that was easy to use and free. The new Govtrip charges each employee \$13.50 every time they file a travel voucher. Summer field crews will have to file a voucher every 2 weeks according to the Govtrip rules, and they'll get charged \$13.50 each time. \$13.50 is not a lot of money by itself, but it will really affect the budget of a trail crew in the summer, at a time where there is no extra money.

This all has the appearance of someone at the top scrambling to meet some target about e-government that was put out there by people who have no clue what goes on at this level. They obviously didn't check to see what the effects would be - it appears all they were concerned about was getting the new programs "out there". It has resulted in a very decreased level of accomplishment, and a very decreased level of job satisfaction and employee morale.

## Exhibit 4, Accompanying Testimony of Ron Thatcher, NFFE-FSC

### Restoring the Federal Public Lands Workforce

March 19, 2009

*The following is an email from a Fire Administrative Office Assistant at a Smokejumper Base, received on March 6, 2009 in response to the Council's solicitation of employee comments on workforce morale and effectiveness.*

- We cannot get leave corrected. ASC does not send out Leave Error Reports so in order to get them, someone in the field has had to pull them (behind ASC's back). Once we get them and try to get them corrected, ASC does not respond. They told us last summer not to expect any leave corrected and that it was not their priority. Leave is critical to correct. The process to get it corrected is terribly time-consuming, and then they won't deal with it.
- eAuthentication does not work for everyone. Now in order for employees to get their pay trailers, they have to go through eAuth. All computer programs have to go through eAuth so the employees that do not have it, are sunk. Our seasonal employees come on in the spring, but within a couple weeks are out on fires. They apply for an eAuthentication password, but by the time it gets here, they're gone. When they come back from the fire, the password has expired. This goes on all summer and never gets resolved.
- Terminated employees and those put into Non-Pay Status at the end of the season still show up on the rolls months after they're gone. ASC has standards to follow just like us, but they're not meeting the required deadlines.
- We are not allowed to process retroactive SF-52's. What ASC does not understand is "stuff happens". During the wintertime, we are constantly sending employees to training and last-minute burn details. The Burn details are coordinated between 2 forests which is difficult in itself, but last-minute calls are the norm, not the exception. In order to keep the burn program going, we have to work on a tight schedule.
- The LincPass does not work for remote locations. To require our employees to travel 240 miles round-trip is ridiculous. Then we have to go back again to pick up the pass. If our security is that bad, someone's doing something wrong.
- When ASC emails things to employees, they usually use their Lotus Notes email address. A lot of our employees can't get onto Lotus Notes because of our lack of IT help. And just like eAuth, when they finally get a password for Lotus Notes, they're gone on a fire.
- Last summer we had several employees not get paid. We called ASC to help us. They will not talk to Admin folks, only to Supervisors or the employee. Problem is, they're all in the field working. When we finally got someone to help, they asked US for the correct banking information. According to them, they were not supposed to have that due to security issues. It took us pestering them to the point of insanity before they would help.

There are hundreds of examples of how ASC does not work. This is just the tip of the iceberg.

Finally, computer programs are great for the 8-5 crowd who sit in front of a computer most of the day. But for the seasonal employees who are field-going, it does not work. They certainly did not bother to ask the field how things should work.

## **Exhibit 5, Accompanying Testimony of Ron Thatcher, NFFE-FSC**

### **Restoring the Federal Public Lands Workforce**

**March 19, 2009**

*The following email was received from a Deputy Forest Fire Management Officer on March 3, 2009. This individual had contacted me for information about how to meet the education requirements for GS-0401 Fire Management Specialist positions, because he was receiving none from agency sources. I asked him to describe his situation for me, which he kindly did.*

Information regarding the GS-401 series has been very slow in coming to the field to say the best. The last information the field has received was a letter from Deputy Chief Kashdan dated November 5, 2008. This letter has continued to create confusion and has not helped provide the field with information as to what courses/classes will or will not count toward the 401 series and how employees may move toward meeting the requirements of the series. Currently I have not been able to provide adequate council to our younger firefighters that will be our future leaders. Without clear direction the training and educating of our future leaders has been basically put on hold. All I can tell them at this time is go to college and then I can not tell them with certainty what courses will count and what courses help them in the careers in fire management. The November 5, 2008 letter states the following: "However, since the positions are established as GS-401, selections must be made in the GS-401 series if there well qualified candidates. If there are no well qualified candidates, managers may select from the GS-462 referral list. And must be prepared to provide training and education opportunities to meet the GS-401 qualification requirements". How are managers supposed to identify what is a well qualified candidate? Current our referral list just show qualified candidates. Currently the thought in this Region is that if there is someone who meets the requirements, you must hire that individual regardless of overall qualifications.

On unit that I am currently on, there are seventeen encumbered positions. Of that number 65% (11 positions) do not currently meet the GS-401 series. These individuals are at varying stages of the educational requirements ranging from needing 6 credits to the full 24 credits (at what level do these credits need to be?). All individuals lost between 14-18 credits when the ability to count National Wildfire Coordinating Group (NWCG) courses was dropped. All of these individuals currently meet or exceed the IFPM skill requirements for a complex Forest. Skills include Operation Section Chief Type 2, Prescribed Fire Burn Boss Type 1, Prescribed Fire Manager Type 1, Safety Officer Type 1, Fire Use Manager Type 1 and Division Supervisor to just name a few. With our current budget level we can not afford to send every one to college; so how do you chose?

I am the individual who needs all 24 credits. My current position is that of a Deputy Forest Fire Management Officer with approximately 28 years of experience. Prior to the dropping of the NWCG courses I was short 6 credits to qualify for the GS-401 series and was in the process of scheduling courses to get those required credits. But when the NWCG courses were dropped it was hard for me to make the case to complete those courses since I will be eligible for retirement in approximately 7 years. Fire Managements skills are built with experience as shown by the required task book system. Maybe the 401 series is not the way to go, if "our objective is to secure the best long term fire management organization with world-class expertise, and which is safe, proud and efficient."