

Forest Service morale sinks to a new low

LAURA PASKUS, HIGH COUNTRY NEWS MONDAY, 29 DECEMBER 2008

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When Dave Iverson first came to the U.S. Forest Service's regional office in Ogden, Utah, in 1980, he was drawn by a love for the outdoors and a desire to do good work on the public lands. But after spending almost three decades on planning and policy, he quit last year just shy of retirement. Overwhelmed by what he called a dysfunctional bureaucracy, he simply couldn't take it any longer.

Iverson says the agency has become "pretty much demoralized and cowering in the shadows. There are almost no people in the higher offices of the Forest Service who will stand up to the powers that be."

He's not alone in thinking that agency staffers feel beset. Beginning in 1990, Gregory Brown, program director of environmental studies at Central Washington University, conducted three surveys of Forest Service employees and their attitudes about their work. These days, says Brown, workforce morale is currently at its lowest. Agency staffers cite the effect of workforce reductions that stress remaining employees, who now have to do multiple jobs. They also cite ambiguous operating procedures and the shift of money away from management programs to fighting wildfires.

Whether the issue is energy development or opening up roadless lands, the Bush administration has pressured employees of federal land-management agencies to bow to the needs of industry and even subvert environmental regulations -- much to the detriment of morale. For the Forest Service -- already struggling when Bush took office -- the last eight years have been particularly hard.

Throughout the 20th century, the agency's primary mission was to provide wood for a growing nation along with multiple benefits such as grazing and outdoor recreation. But economic changes and environmental issues -- think spotted owl -- caused timber harvests to drop from 12 billion board-feet in the late 1980s to 3 billion today. Nothing replaced that mission, says Andy Stahl, executive director of the nonprofit Forest Service Employees for Environmental Ethics. Instead, by default, the agency became the "Fire Service," with about half its budget relegated to firefighting. And even though demands from industry, the public and collaborative partners have continued to increase under Bush, funding for everything from wilderness and recreation programs to law enforcement and wildlife has not.

Forest Service employees were also whacked by two Bush administration initiatives: The competitive outsourcing initiative, which would have privatized about two-thirds of the agency's workforce, and the consolidation of personnel offices in Albuquerque, N.M. Fortunately, the outsourcing initiative was cut short, but beginning three years ago, personnel employees from regional and field offices were faced with the decision either to relocate or leave their jobs.

But rather than cut through administrative tangles, the consolidation has spawned new complications: All employees must now deal with their own paperwork -- related to travel or new hires, for example -- or else run it through the Albuquerque office, which Stahl says has become a "black hole," thanks in part to a poorly designed computer system. And while an estimated 800 employees work there, no one seems able to answer questions about current employment and attrition numbers. Instead, the

requests ended up being routed through Washington, D.C., and an office in Arkansas.

“Those are the types of day-to-day incompetencies of the Bush administration that were driven by ideology,” says Stahl. “Neither (initiative) proved to be better or cheaper, and both were incredibly devastating to the workforce.”

Aside from low morale, the incoming administration will face another major workforce challenge: Planning for the “gray wave” of retiring federal employees.

In 2006, the nonprofit Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility analyzed age trends within the “green agencies” — the Forest Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, EPA and BLM. They found that between one-third and one-half of all specialist employees -- some 30,000 scientists, rangers, inspectors and enforcement attorneys -- will become eligible for retirement by 2011. That means a lot of institutional memory and expertise will be vanishing toward the end of Barack Obama’s first term, says Jeff Ruch, PEER’s executive director.

Agency staffers can only hope that life will be different under an Obama administration, but as Ruch puts it, “Right now, if we were going to do those kind of wartime metaphors, this is like Warsaw at the end of WWII, where there are hard-bitten survivors, but there are a lot fewer now than there were at the beginning.”

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