

**Oral 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 testify before you today.

I'm Ron Thatcher, President of the National Federation of Federal Employees' Forest Service Council. 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.

Forest Service employees are among the most dedicated public servants in the federal workforce. This is why obstacles to getting our work done decrease our morale as well as our effectiveness.

One such obstacle is the erosion of the land management workforce as more funds out of a flat budget go to wildfire suppression each year. We support the approach taken by the FLAME Act, in which funding for catastrophic wildfires does not come at the expense of land management work.

Another problem is a seemingly endless stream of ill-planned and harmful reorganizations and new technologies, methods, and policies. For example:

- administrative support personnel were removed from field offices and command to centralized service centers that report to Washington,
- a "self-service" model in which highly graded employees now perform more clerical and administrative tasks has been put in place,
- mandated use of phone support for field-going employees
- the rush to put new software in place before it is tested

Employees simply can't get to the jobs they were trained to do because they are bogged down with administrative tasks they weren't trained to do.

The centralization of Human Capital Management has probably been the biggest problem:

- The list of problems goes on and on. For example, we bring some 15,000 employees onto the roles each field season. Now, some are sent to work before they are "hired," with a promise that we'll get their pay to them later. When they go off the roles at the end of the season, their lump sum payments are often delayed by months.
- Employees at all levels report the occurrence of a shift of power and authority away from the field to the centralized Human Capital Management organization – an unintended consequence of removing the supervision of these functions from field managers. One employee noted, HCM is supposed to be a support function, but has become "the tail that wags the dog." Another said, "It's like they created a kingdom that answers to nobody."

Finally, I want to mention the reclassification of fire managers into the GS-0401 series. This imposes new academic requirements which in many cases are unrelated to the duties of these positions. This may force as many as a third of our field generals in the war on fire out of the jobs they have successfully performed for years. Plus, it imposes a glass ceiling for some of our most capable leaders coming up through the ranks. 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.

So, how did we get to this point? In every case, we hear the same thing: leadership didn't ask the field. In many cases, the ultimate decision can be traced all the way up to former President Bush: competitive sourcing quotas were the driving force behind the centralization and downsizing of Human Capital Management. Other decisions, such as timetables that prevented adequate testing of new software applications, were mandated by the Department or by even higher levels of the government. In these cases, even our agency leaders were excluded from the decision-making process.

However, not all sources of top-down, secretive, and unaccountable decision-making are outside of the agency. It is agency officials who elected to exclude field employees, even the agency's top field managers with decades of experience, from the decision to reclassify fire managers.

We believe it is time for a new way. It is self-evident that front-line employees are the ones who know the best way to get their jobs done. We need to tap into this collective wisdom. To make the best decisions, the agency needs to engage employees as advisors, even as collaborators. This is particularly true of the Forest Service, an institution in which one size doesn't fit all because of the diversity of lands, from Alaska to Alabama, for which the agency is responsible.

This new way of doing business will require officials to embrace the principles of transparency and accountability articulated by President Obama. The payoff will be shared accountability and shared ownership – a

decision informed by better information and a workforce motivated to make the decision work.

To encourage this, we recommend passage of a Federal Labor-Management Partnership Act and the Whistleblower Protection Enhancement Act of 2009. These bills would help put an “accountability infrastructure” in place that would allow employees to collaborate with agency officials on the difficult problems we face.

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, this concludes my oral statement. Thank you for the opportunity. I would be happy to answer any questions.