

An Agency to Match the Mountains

A proposal for structural and cultural transformation and a U.S. Forest Service Academy for entry-level personnel

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Assuming the U.S. Government's natural resource management effort is not radically changed and the U.S. Forest Service retains stewardship of the National Forest System, that agency must revitalize itself as an "Agency to Match the Mountains" more capable of meeting the challenges of the Twenty-first Century.

Since it cannot depend on Congress for statutory clarification of its missions and methods, the Forest Service must focus on strategic development of a leadership and management structure and culture true to the agency's traditional values and responsive to its current and future challenges—including coping with ambiguous and conflicting mission statements in a way that better serves the public interest.

In other words, the Forest Service must do all it can on its own to serve successfully—even should Congress fail to facilitate such service. Vital to such success are a revised administrative structure and recruitment and retention of a forest officer corps prepared for service by a U.S. Forest Service Academy.

Background

Despite such efforts as Chief Max Peterson's November 13-15, 1985, Snowbird, Utah, meeting of forest supervisors to address the future of the Forest Service (and, by extension, the National Forest System) and the quality of its leadership, image, and morale as well as its ability to carry out the mission summarized as "caring for the land and serving people," the agency remains in a difficult situation due to decreasing budgets and training.

Chief Dale Bosworth's October 12, 2004, remark to the National Leadership Team that he envisioned "a day when the Forest Service has truly returned to its roots" indicated that the functional Forest Service of the future must be founded structurally and culturally on the traditional values of the past adapted for and applied to meeting the leadership and management challenges of the future.

Though good people still accomplish good work, evolving perceptions of the Forest Service are that it is having great difficulty demonstrating that vision or that work. Instead, citizens and communities perceive a Forest Service increasingly unresponsive to critical natural resource issues and challenges, and increasingly unable to anticipate and act coherently and effectively in the face of those issues and challenges in a way that adds up to accomplishing a noble mission.

Transformation

Regardless of how its mission is defined now or in the future, the Forest Service itself must act now to evolve an administrative structure and personnel culture more capable of administering the National Forest System—as well as accomplishing its supporting Forestry Research and State & Private Forestry missions—for and in partnership with its citizen-owners in a manner that

maximizes the national forests' amenity and commodity resource contributions to national and local economies in a way citizens and their representatives in Congress can see, understand, appreciate, and support.

Such transformation of today's Forest Service into tomorrow's Forest Service:

- Cannot be put off .
- Must be accomplished within constraints of current and future funding limitations to focus limited resources on mission accomplishment.
- Must be accomplished through significant structural and cultural transformations to accomplish the job on the ground in the most efficient and effective manner.
- Must capitalize on efficient and effective adaptations of the Forest Service's unique heritage and the traditional mystique of the forest ranger as both the public reality and public image of a visible and viable modern natural resource management and public service agency.

Structural Transformation would restructure the Forest Service to implement National Forest System management plans, policy, and practice *on the ground*.

Such restructuring could take many forms. One approach could reduce resource expenditures at the Washington Office and Regional Office levels—or such hierarchy levels as might result from a structural review—to direct more resources toward field operations.

In very general terms:

- Regional Offices might be realigned and resized to reflect realities of modern modes of administrative communications and coordination.
- Supervisor's Offices could provide administrative and specialist support to ranger districts on a national forest/a few national forests to relieve district rangers and their field personnel of most of the staff work currently completed by field personnel via computer that diverts focus from effective field work—presence, protection, and project implementation—on ranger districts. District rangers would participate in—but not be overwhelmed by—staff work; they and their personnel would be “released” to accomplish work in the field and in their communities.
- Ranger districts of “rangerable” size serving identifiable communities and coherent geographical units, rather than the mega-districts evolving or extant which lack such unifying characteristics, would focus on a visible and viable public service presence and implementing resource management projects on the ground.
- Ranger districts would be headquartered at ranger stations within the communities or on national forests (as local conditions dictate) that are easily identifiable as such and readily available to both community members and forest visitors and users.
- Ranger district personnel would be identifiable in the office and in the field as Forest Service members in a way that would make the most positive impression on the public.
- Ranger district personnel would be the Forest Service's “friendly face and helping hand” at the ranger station, in the field, and in all appropriate public venues, and readily available.
- Ranger districts and their facilities (stations, campgrounds, trailheads, roads and trails, etc.) would be properly signed and maintained to look like well-cared-for national forest

facilities (all too many now are having great difficulty maintaining that standard) that reflect the pride and professionalism of dedicated agency personnel.

Cultural Transformation is the *sine qua non* of the Forest Service as the “Agency to Match the Mountains” it must be to succeed at its National Forest System administration and other missions.

In this context, “Cultural Transformation” refers to ***reviving and instilling traditional Forest Service core values as the basis for rejuvenating the Forest Service as a corps of capable and competent “forest rangers.”***

These core Forest Service values include:

- ***Pride and Professionalism.*** Personal pride in serving as a forest officer whose status as a “member” and not just an “employee” reflects in consistently conscientious and competent performance of duty to achieve the agency’s mission as a forest officer as well as a forester, engineer, or other specialist.
- ***Service Tradition.*** Personal commitment to a Forest Service and a National Forest System that capitalizes on the agency’s storied past to fulfill public expectations of ethical and positive public service in a way that reflects credit on the Forest Service and its mission and gains public appreciation and support.
- ***Ranger Skills.*** Personal mastery of the art and science of “rangering.”
- ***Leadership and Management Skills.*** Personal understanding of the difference between leadership (of people) and management (of assets and funds) and effective skills for practicing each.

Instilling and implementing these core values would rejuvenate a Forest Service:

- Present and visible in the forests and communities
- Possessed of a wide range of knowledge, skills, and abilities essential to forest officers
- Supported by rather than subservient to appropriate specialists and technologies
- Doing jobs in the field rather than outsourcing them
- Capitalizing on a proud heritage
- Attracting rather than alienating those who would serve in it rather than just work for it
- Dedicated to service as forest officers first and as foresters, engineers, etc., second
- Confident in and proud of its individual and collective abilities to get the job done
- Characterized by a camaraderie and esprit de corps second to none
- Adept at engaging the public in ways that promote its relevancy to American life
- Capable of training and leading seasonal counterparts as forest officers possessed of these same attributes
- Worthy of admiration and respect and support of the National Forest System citizen-owners who would be well-served by it

Core values and expectations and the basic skills to realize and implement them *are most effectively introduced and internalized at the beginning of a potential forest officer’s career* when Forest Service requirements of its professional and technical personnel should be made perfectly clear in word and deed as he or she decides if this is the career for him or her, as he or she develops the perspective that informs his or her personal work ethic as well as the professional knowledge, skills, and abilities essential to career and mission success.

To review the USDA Pathways Program approach “to recruit, hire, and retain a diverse and talented workforce” for the Forest Service and other U.S. Department of Agriculture agencies, which became effective on July 10, 2012, is to be struck not by what’s there but by what’s missing.

A U.S. Forest Service Academy

What the USDA Pathways Program approach most sorely lacks—at least in terms of what Forest Service personnel recruitment and retention most sorely need—is an academically and physically challenging and personally and professionally rewarding basic course or officer candidate school at which Forest Service core values, knowledge, and skills would be imparted and ***entry-level personnel*** would be acculturated.

The key to a restored and rejuvenated Forest Service culture is a new institution—a U.S. Forest Service Academy—to serve as the intellectual and cultural wellspring of the Forest Service. Such an institution offering a thorough orientation not currently available would compliment—not conflict with—other existing programs such as the leadership courses that are being offered and are absolutely essential. The mid-level and senior-level programs appear to be excellent and should be continued. The proposed Academy is geared toward the entry level at this point and at the district-level forest officer.

What appear to be successful mid-career and senior-level career development efforts may or may not affiliate with such an Academy once it and its entry-level personnel development program are established.

A Basic Forest Officer Course—an entry-level education and training program established and supported by the Washington Office—is the key to the cultural transformation and rejuvenation of the Forest Service as the more viable, more effective, and—given anticipated continued budget constraints—more efficient Forest Service.

It is at the beginnings of careers that members of any organization develop the values and perspectives that guide their service—that make them truly members of the organization. The armed forces through their respective service academies and officer candidate schools have long benefitted from and continue to benefit from this approach. So have many civilian agencies.

The highly effective Forest Service at one time grew its own corps of forest officers—dedicated professionals and technicians recruited for their academic and practical attributes—on mostly rural or remote ranger districts where the district ranger depended on and mentored each and every member of his small crew.

Most such ranger districts—and forest officer development opportunities—have been lost to district consolidation and urbanization. The generalists they grew have been replaced by more narrowly-focused specialists.

The Forest Service cannot “return to the good old days” of such forest officer development, but it can move ahead to recapture their benefits.

To successfully address the current and future forest officer corps needs, the Forest Service should:

- Continue to recruit a gender and ethnically diverse population of the most academically and physically qualified entry-level professionals and technicians selected for their aptitude for public service and ability to do the job.
- Challenge this population and the current Forest Service population to evolve a special public service culture focused on “caring for the land and serving people” to implement

the Forest Service mission in a manner that not only enhances the national forests but earns the respect and support of the citizen-owners.

A Curriculum for an academically and physically rigorous residential basic course (duration determined by fiscal and facility realities) should include the following instructional components inspiringly taught by Forest Service professionals (and perhaps a “civilian” professor or two) qualified to teach at the college level:

- U.S. Forest Service and the National Forest System...legal basis, mission and mandates, organization of Forest Service, geography and resources of National Forest System; other natural resource agencies and their missions and lands
- U.S. Forest Service History and Literature...an agency heritage survey based on current edition of Harold K. Steen’s *The U.S. Forest Service: A History* and other assigned readings
- U.S. Forest Service Career Opportunities and Development...line and staff career patterns and their pursuit
- U.S. Forest Service Leadership and Management...the difference between leadership (of people) and management (of assets) and the basics of each, interpersonal relations, following leaders and leading others, administrative management systems and processes
- U.S. Forest Service Pride and Professionalism...the art and science of rangers and imparting these skills to others, personal standards and ethics, agency aesthetics and image
- U.S. Forest Service Public Affairs and Partnerships...policy, oral and written communication, partnerships and collaboration, conflict resolution, public interaction to instill public confidence
- U.S. Forest Service Policies and Practices...statutory and regulatory policies and implementation (“Forest Service Law”), coping skills for dealing with conflicting statutory and regulatory guidance
- U.S. Forest Service Field Skills and Tools...traditional skills including trail and cross-country travel, hand and power tool use, field work experiences
- U.S. Forest Service Fitness, Health, and Safety...daily physical training, healthy living and nutrition, first aid, Forest Service Health and Safety Code

A Campus for a U.S. Forest Service Academy could take one of several forms.

Ideally, the campus should be a purpose-built facility at an easily-accessed site on a national forest in the West (close to most students) that has a significantly diverse multiple-use resource management program including a large recreation program to provide an array of curriculum-related field experiences. Student field experiences could benefit the hosting national forest by accomplishing certain aspects of its workload. This hosting national forest could be, in effect, a “teaching national forest” akin to a teaching hospital.

Ideally, the campus would be modern, functional, and reflect the aura of the Forest Service. It would comprise a main building for offices and classrooms, residential living and dining facility, practical skills and fitness facilities, and other outbuildings in a proper setting.

Realistically, given fiscal constraints, the campus might be—at least initially—tenant on the existing campus of the National Conservation Training Center in Shepherdstown, West Virginia. Such tenancy would address the facility issue at much less cost, and classroom and residence hall

availabilities (along with other fiscal considerations) would help determine class sizes and course durations and frequencies.

Still more affordable campus options might be currently-unused Forest Service facilities that could host perhaps month-long, regional-level implementations of a national curriculum, or even the “virtual campus” of a national forest supervisor’s office or ranger district facility that could host perhaps a week-long version of a very basic entry-level course presented by a small traveling faculty.

A Faculty and Staff for a U.S. Forest Service Academy would be determined by course duration(s) and location(s).

That of a national campus could comprise a superintendent, administrative officer-registrar, a counselor, a librarian-information technology specialist, and a small cadre of instructors. All would have appropriate Forest Service as well as academic, professional, and practical experience backgrounds, and would be selected for their abilities to teach and inspire. All faculty and staff would work daily with students.

In a decentralized version of the Academy concept, smaller regional faculty and staff units or a national traveling team of two instructors could implement shorter-term versions of the entry-level course.

The essence of the U.S. Forest Service Academy concept—and the essential difference between it and other approaches to agency leadership and management education and training mostly outsourced to contractors—is its comprehensive and coordinated, highly-structured, personally-taught program with specific learning objectives to meet unique Forest Service entry-level personnel development requirements.

Establishing such an institution as this proposed U.S. Forest Service Academy is a daunting challenge and prospect even to consider given the current and probable future fiscal environment. There is, however, a compelling case for beginning the process that begins with accepting the concept and continues with...

- further articulating curricula of varying complexity, duration, and feasibility for potential future funding;
- identifying potential faculty requirements and appropriate faculty members;
- identifying potential campus facilities;
- and identifying or repurposing sufficient funds for development of at least a pilot course.

Action needs to start now. The Forest Service is in dire need, and it will take some time to power up and execute any version of the U.S. Forest Service Academy concept.

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