

Statement of
DALE N. BOSWORTH
Chief, USDA Forest Service
Concerning
Views and Vision of the new Chief of the Forest Service
Before the
SUBCOMMITTEE OF FORESTS AND FOREST HEALTH
COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

I appreciate the opportunity to be here today to talk about my views and vision for the Forest Service. Let me also say, as Chief of the Forest Service for only a few weeks, I am deeply honored to have been selected.

First, I am grateful to Secretary Veneman for her confidence in me, and I thank the dedicated, hard working employees of the Forest Service for their support and encouragement. Let me also express my appreciation in advance to you Mr. Chairman, Mr. Inslee, and members of the Subcommittee for working with the Forest Service and me during this transition.

I would like to start my testimony by saying a few words about myself and my life-long commitment to the Forest Service. I have worked in the Forest Service for 35 years. I am what in the agency is often called a “Forest Service brat,” a title I inherited because my father was also a Forest Service employee. It is fair to say I have a lifetime of being part of the Forest Service culture, traditions, and debates about management of America’s forests and rangelands. Coming from this background, I am truly humbled by the duties entrusted in me as Chief and I am eager to lead this agency through challenging times.

In my testimony today, I will briefly talk about a couple of themes of my leadership. First, I will discuss the fundamentals central to our ability to get the job done—providing the support and resources for “on-the-ground” work, reconnecting the headquarters with the field, and empowering local decision-making. Next, I will discuss agency accountability. I will talk about accountability not only in the implementation of financial reforms, but also from the standpoint of getting our work done. I also want to talk about how the National Fire Plan, with its strong focus on protecting communities from the dangers of catastrophic fire represents a broader focus on how, in general, we

need to manage the Nation's forests and rangelands to protect communities and natural resources, and provide services and products on a sustainable basis.

Management Priorities

Mr. Chairman, as a Regional Forester in two regions over the past 7 years, and in many other positions in the Forest Service, I have developed an appreciation for the job being performed on-the-ground by our employees, the foundation of our credibility with the public. This applies to researchers, employees on the National Forests and Grasslands, and employees who provide support to State, local, private, Tribal and international stakeholders. It is the responsibility of employees in the national headquarters and at the regional offices to ensure the best possible support is given to that on-the-ground job. Over the next several months, I want to emphasize what I think is essential in establishing a "reconnection" between the headquarters and the field. I want to make sure that ongoing initiatives to improve financial compliance and track natural resource information do not unintentionally hinder employees from doing their work. This assessment of ongoing initiatives does not alter the agency's commitment to moving forward with achieving financial accountability.

One of the greatest strengths of the Forest Service is the ability of line officers at the forest and ranger district level to make and implement decisions that take local community interests into account. I am concerned that in recent years this ability has been limited by an over-reliance on top-down initiatives that have dis-empowered local decision making, and have prevented the greatest possible funding from reaching the field unit level. I firmly believe that each field unit has different needs. A single management prescription cannot produce healthy forests and rangelands that provide opportunities to deliver goods and services across the wide array of environments in which our National Forests and Grasslands exist.

Along these lines I believe we need to adjust the role of our Washington Office. Instead of providing specific management direction, the goal of the Washington Office needs to be one of providing broad program and policy direction and then the necessary programmatic level of review to ensure that we are accountable for accomplishing funded objectives and achieving desired results.

In the immediate future, I will work closely with Secretary Veneman to assess recent initiatives to make sure the ability to manage and protect our diverse resources is not adversely affected. We will assess the agency's strategic goals and objectives to ensure full compatibility with local forest plans and priorities. To get the agency's work done it is critical to ensure funds held at the headquarters and regional levels are only those funds that are essential to accomplishing our mission. In recent years the amount of funds taken off the top has grown to unprecedented levels. While the majority of this funding ultimately goes to the field, too much does not. Too little of this money goes to projects that directly support on-the-ground accomplishments. Two weeks ago the Forest Service, with help from field line officers, began the most intensive screening of this off the top

funding in years. I will personally make the final decision on funds held at the headquarters level.

I also intend to take a close look at the organizational leadership structure of the Forest Service. I want to make sure our line officers are empowered to make and implement natural resource management decisions at the field level, in the best tradition of our decentralized organization, while assuring that systems used in the field meet best business practices and are consistent and comply with national law, regulation, and policy. I intend to be available to all employees at all levels of the organization so they can give me their insights. One of the first things I did as Chief was to have the Regional Foresters and Station Directors report directly to me, so I can personally maintain day-to-day contact with the field.

Accountability

Another key theme of my leadership will be to continue the improvement of our financial accountability that has been a significant emphasis of the agency for the past three years. Under the direction of Secretary Veneman, we will continue on the path of bringing our financial management and accounting of agency assets into full compliance with the best business management standards.

However, as I mentioned earlier, being accountable is much more than having good financial accountability. It is delivering on program commitments.

I intend to provide the agency's line officers with the resources to perform on-the-ground work, and systems that allow them to efficiently report their accomplishments. We must emphasize performance accountability as strongly as we emphasize financial accountability.

National Fire Plan

As I mentioned, one of our greatest current needs is to address the threat to our forests and communities from the enormous build-up of hazardous fuels that has occurred in the National Forests and Grasslands. As a Regional Forester, I personally witnessed the catastrophic wildland fires that occurred in the Bitterroot Mountains of Montana last year.

The National Fire Plan is a good example of what can be achieved when Congress and the Administration work together. It also is a good example of how the Forest Service can integrate the full array of agency programs to improve the health of our Nation's forests by providing the resources needed to protect communities and natural resources from wildland fires and invasive species. Additionally, through our outstanding Research and State and Private Forestry programs, the Fire Plan provides emphasis to developing technologies that will increase the use of forest products by communities and industry. These programs have the potential to make it economically beneficial for the Forest Service and private industry to restore the health of the land by increasing the value and

use of traditionally non-or low valued forest products. The balancing process of restoring forests and protecting communities will integrate local community employment and expanding local economic capacity with the generation of forest and range products to accomplish restoration objectives.

Working with the States and local communities we have made a good start on implementing hazardous fuel reduction projects, increasing our fire suppression capabilities, and providing financial and technical assistance to assist communities to address wildfire concerns in the urban-wildland interface.

Conclusion

Mr. Chairman, Secretary Veneman has made clear to me that she wants the Forest Service to be a world-class provider of goods and services for America. I know the agency has that capability. To that end, I intend to personally devote my attention to achieving this goal through emphasis on the management priorities I have described and continued aggressive adherence to improved performance accountability. Let me again say that I am deeply honored to be the Chief of the Forest Service. I look forward to working with you and thank you for your support. I will be happy to answer any questions.