

FOREST NEWS

Citizens and Forest Service employees working together to protect our National Forests

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Logging? Ecosystem restoration? Recreation? What is the Forest Service identity? Some agency officials believe that it's the \$10 million question.

Forest Service Shelves Rebranding Plans

The Forest Service has scrubbed plans to pay a private contractor up to \$10 million in an effort to forge a new “brand identity” after rank-and-file agency employees, informed of the project by FSEEE, voiced concern.

Agency officials issued a request for proposals, called “Organizational Transformation and Support Services,” in late November. The solicitation called for hiring a private consultant to lead a five-year nationwide effort to forge a new public face for the Forest Service.

FSEEE learned of the proposal in mid-December. Shortly thereafter, Executive Director Andy Stahl sent an email to all agency employees informing them of the initiative and asking for their input.

Very few Forest Service employees were aware of the proposal. FSEEE received dozens of messages from employees, none of them in favor of the rebranding effort. Almost all of the comments panned the proposal (*read more on page 2*).

Many of the employees said they believed the money would be better spent elsewhere. Others lamented that the proposal seemed a desperate attempt for the agency to find its way.

“Wow. What a sad reflection of our great USFS legacy,” one Forest Service employee wrote. “By all appearances we

have lost our identity and are groping blindly in the dark for anyone who can tell us what we stand for now.”

Many more employees contacted agency higher-ups and voiced concerns about the proposal. On January 6, agency officials announced they were scrapping the plan.

“No bids from this proposal were accepted,” officials said in a prepared statement. “The Forest Service will continue to seek other ways to enhance citizens’ access to the national forests and grasslands, and increase citizens’ knowledge of the services available to them.”

The story attracted widespread media attention, appearing in the New York Times, the Washington Post and outlets across the country. **FN**

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Employees Sound Off

When FSEEE caught wind of a plan by Forest Service administrators to launch a \$10 million “rebranding” effort, we did something we rarely do: We sent word to all agency employees via email.

The vast majority of Forest Service employees hadn’t heard anything about the proposal. We told them about it, and then we asked two simple questions, taken directly from the agency’s own documents: What is “the Forest Service story?” What is the Forest Service “brand identity?”

Rank-and-file employees had a lot to say. They also delivered an earful to Forest Service leaders about their concerns with the proposal.

Here’s a sampling of the emails we received from Forest Service employees in response to those two questions:



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“Why the need for an image overhaul?”

“I received your email, and all I can say is are you kidding me? This is the kind of thing that Forest Service leadership is spending that kind of time and money on while places like the Forest Products Lab flounder? Shouldn’t our leadership have that figured out by now? How will spending 10 million dollars on outside contractors spiffing up Smokey’s image help that?”

“...I would hate to see them waste that much money when we are constantly working so hard to figure out how to do more with less.”

“Another \$10 mil on fricken’ image, there goes another 100,000 acres of ecosystem restoration opportunity lost, or 4-5 Forest Plans not updated, or 150 fewer employees funded as effective land stewards, all wasted on more IMAGE B.S. We already spent a mil on standardizing our email addresses. We’re all about IMAGE these days. Classic example of why FS employees rate our Senior leadership effectiveness amongst the lowest of any agency in the federal government.”

“Really—the budget as flat as it is and Wage Freezes for 3 Years and the Powers that Be are spending [Ten] Million on a PR Campaign – that is obscene!!!!”

“So if any of us offer suggestions and they get used by this ‘group’ hired to rebrand ... do we get to share in the 2 million? ... cause if I’m not mistaken ... our pay has been frozen for how long?”

“To be quite honest, I see this as wasteful spending. These funds could go a long way towards hiring researchers and purchasing modern equipment that they need to do their jobs.”

“Wow. What a sad reflection of our great USFS legacy. By all appearances we have lost our identity, and are groping blindly in the dark for anyone who can tell us what we stand for now.”

“Thanks for this info. I hope we end up hearing about a change in the plan for this solicitation as a result of FS employees learning about this.”

“What a waste of money.”

“If you took the \$10 million and sunk it into the Forest Service recreation program to improve recreation opportunities on NFS, that would change our image with the public.”

“I think most people know why we lost our identity. We no longer have the resources to manage the land and protect the resources adequately. Now we are proposing to spend up to \$10 million trying to convince the public we are doing a great job? The public is dissatisfied with us because they see our recreation sites falling apart, trails closing due to lack of maintenance, and forest health declining. A \$10 million campaign trying to convince the public we are doing great things without actually doing them will only further damage the Forest Service image.”

“I would say, why are we wasting money on branding instead of getting that money to the field, where it actually serves the public???? \$500,000 cleans a lot of toilets.”

When the Forest Service announced a \$10 million rebranding contract the day after Thanksgiving, FSEEE knew something didn't smell quite right.



© New Jersey Division of Fish & Wildlife

Taking Out the Trash



Andy Stahl, Executive Director

Cronyism, like motive, is tough to prove but easily smelled. When FSEEE looked into the Forest Service's proposed \$10 million rebranding contract, it didn't pass the stink test.

First was the timing. The bid solicitation went public on the Federal Business Opportunities website the day after Thanksgiving, with bidding closed the day after Christmas. Flying under the radar.

Taking out the trash. No matter what it's called, the timing looked designed to avoid attention.

Second was the Forest Service-wide ignorance about this unprecedented contract. No one in public affairs would answer our questions. No one admitted knowing anything about it. Although we were promised repeatedly that a knowledgeable staffer would call back, no one ever did. Our typically reliable and senior-most internal informants were equally unhelpful. They had never heard of it. Whoever was behind this rebranding idea was very senior and very interested in keeping the contract quiet.

Third, the solicitation's fine print read like a sweetheart deal. Prospective bidders were told that if they underbid the current incumbent's price they risked rejection for "lack of sound management judgment." The contract, although nationwide in scope, required the chosen public relations

consultant's staff to visit Portland, Oregon, on a monthly basis. It didn't escape our attention that Portland is headquarters to the Metropolitan Group, which held the smaller, Pacific Northwest contract. These factors combined would make it mathematically easy for the Forest Service to reject any non-Portland bidder. The agency could simply say Firm X could not compete on hourly rates (i.e., no less than \$374.81/hour for "Creative Director" costs) and was non-competitive on travel costs.

So what made the Metropolitan Group such a desirable contractor? Was its work product for the Pacific Northwest region so compelling that no one else could do as good a job? That's a subjective question that I'll let readers answer for themselves (you can view the Metropolitan Group project via YouTube at www.metgroup.co/usfs_sample/). If that were the case, why was the Forest Service so reluctant to talk about it? Why wasn't the Forest Service proudly showing off its stellar accomplishments for all to see?

At the end of the day, whatever the merits of this \$10 million rebranding proposal, they proved insufficient for the Forest Service to defend in public. With a congressional

"At the end of the day, whatever the merits of this \$10 million rebranding proposal, they proved insufficient for the Forest Service to defend in public."

committee calling for a briefing on the contract before its award, the Forest Service did an abrupt about-face. The Forest Service's spokesman read a two-sentence statement rejecting all bids and refused to entertain any questions from the media.

Cronyism is not corruption. No money need change hands; no one need be on the take. Cronyism is a reflection of our human nature. We like our friends. We believe in those who agree with us. Anyone is capable of drinking the Kool-Aid. After all, a public relations company had better be good at marketing itself, or it doesn't have anything to sell. **FN**



Field Notes

FSEEE is inventorying military activities on national forests across the country. So far, we've documented dozens of such uses.

Just a few examples:

- The Army National Guard has free rein to conduct training exercises on all parts of the St. Francis National Forest in Arkansas except campgrounds and developed recreation areas.
- The Air Force conducts extensive training exercises on New Mexico's Cibola National Forest. According to Forest Service records, those include "helicopter and fixed-wing training, tactical ground operations, and parachute training."
- The Navy uses California's Cleveland National Forest to conduct "Survival, Escape, Resistance and Evasion" camps.

We are examining these and many other military activities on national forests to determine if they are an appropriate and legal use of public lands.

OLYMPIC WAR EXERCISES DECISION DELAYED

A decision on a controversial Navy proposal to conduct high-tech military exercises in Washington's Olympic National Forest will be delayed until this summer, Forest Service officials say.

The Navy wants to station three "mobile transmitters" on logging roads in a dozen locations in the national forest. The vehicles would emit electromagnetic signals mimicking hostile transmissions that Navy jets would try to identify and intercept.

Navy officials need a special use permit from the Forest Service to proceed with the plan.

Dean Millett, the Olympic district ranger charged with deciding whether to approve the Navy's request, said the Forest Service received more than 3,000 comments on the plan.

He said Olympic National Forest officials may call in an "enterprise" unit to help analyze public input. That would consist of Forest Service employees skilled in evaluating controversial projects.

"Right now, we're trying to determine how to handle all that feedback," Millett said. "Very ballpark, I think it will be about mid-2015 before we know whether we're going to approve the Navy's request."

Residents of the Olympic Peninsula are concerned the transmissions could harm people and wildlife. The Navy's plan calls for deploying the transmitters up to 260 days a year.

When in use, operators would be required to place warning tape around the transmitters and to post signs advising of "Electromagnetic Radiation Hazard."

Navy officials say the transmissions would be aimed up to the sky,

and that they would pose no threat to humans or wildlife. They say the project would save taxpayers money and allow Navy pilots to spend more time with their families.

Currently, pilots must fly 400 miles from Whidbey Island Naval Air Station to Mountain Home, Idaho, to conduct such training.

Local residents are also concerned about increased noise from the EA-18G Growler jets (pictured top left) that fly over the national forest and the adjacent Olympic National Park. The Navy wants to add as many as 36 Growlers to its Whidbey Island fleet.

Last fall, the Forest Service held a series of well-attended public hearings on the issue. FSEEE's Executive Director testified on the legality of the proposal, contending that it would violate the Olympic National Forest's management plan.

Port Townsend resident Karen Sullivan is helping organize opposition to the Navy's proposal. She says local residents are concerned about a marked increase in Navy activity on the peninsula and in surrounding waters.

Sullivan fears Forest Service officials feel obligated to allow the Navy to conduct war exercises on national forest lands.

"At all the public meetings, whenever the Forest Service was asked a question, it was the military person who answered," she said. "The sense of entitlement that the Navy has with regard to the Olympic National Forest is pretty shocking."

Navy officials have also proposed deploying mobile transmitters on the Okanogan and Colville national forests in Washington. **FN**

GREEN LIGHT FOR GOLD MINE

Federal land managers have given the go-ahead to a major open-pit gold mine in northeastern Nevada, even though a rare population of desert fish could go extinct if it is built.

Newmont Mining Corp. wants to dig the mine in the remote Pequop Mountains. A 500-acre network of wetlands called Big Springs sits at the base of the Pequops, right next to the proposed mine. Big Springs is home to a genetically distinct population of fish called relict dace.

This winter, the Bureau of Land Management released its final environmental impact statement for the mine. It recommended that Newmont be allowed to proceed with the mine.

The BLM suggested that Newmont relocate much of the mine's infrastructure away from the springs. But the mine—a two-mile-long, mile-wide pit—would be located adjacent to the springs.

According to fish biologists, Big Springs offers the best remaining habitat for relict dace. A study conducted last year showed that the Big Springs dace have lived there, in isolation, for

nearly 300,000 years—long enough to set off on their own unique evolutionary course.

The final environmental impact statement confirms that construction of the mine could result in the extinction of the Big Springs dace.

“The potential decline of wetlands could lead to the loss of endemic species including relict dace,” according to the document.

Last summer, FSEEE filed a petition to list the Big Springs dace for protection under the Endangered Species Act. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service must issue a ruling on that petition later this year.

Whitney Wirthlin, a geologist with the BLM, said FSEEE's letter prompted agency officials to consult with Newmont officials.

She said Newmont will conduct regular monitoring of flow rates and water quality in Big Springs.

The springs serve as the primary source of drinking water for the cities of West Wendover, Nevada, and Wendover, Utah.

Newmont and other companies have conducted extensive prospecting in the Pequops in recent years. In 2012, West Wendover officials detected surfactants—a substance used in exploratory drilling—in Big Springs.

That prompted the mayors of the two cities to write to the BLM expressing concern.

“Despite (Newmont's) best efforts,” they wrote, “the water quality of the spring has already been adversely affected merely by its early exploration efforts.”

Since then, Newmont has agreed to drill wells to provide an alternative source of drinking water to the two cities. The company will also make annual payments of \$310,000 to the two cities for use of the Big Springs water.

Wirthlin said Newmont has about two dozen monitoring wells at the site, and will check them at least quarterly as the mining proceeds.

“We have taken (the water issue) into consideration and have worked with Newmont to try to cut down their water usage,” she said. **FN**

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