

Attempt to move Forest Service could spark turf war

1 March 2009, By Les Blumenthal

In what eventually could become a major bureaucratic turf war, there have been stirrings on Capitol Hill about moving the U.S. Forest Service from the Agriculture to the Interior Department.

For more than a century, the Forest Service, which manages the federal forests, has been part of the Agriculture Department, while the nation's three other public lands agencies -- the Bureau of Land Management, the Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Park Service -- have been at Interior.

Together, the Forest Service and these other agencies manage more than 680 million acres of forests, rangelands, wetlands, pristine parks and untouched wilderness, mostly in the West.

Backers of the switch say it makes sense because the agencies face such similar problems as climate change, wildfires and the pressures of urbanization. Critics say the move wouldn't save much money, at least initially, and it could leave the Forest Service more vulnerable to political pressure.

"We believe there is a need to approach these things innovatively -- to think outside the box," Robin Nazzaro, director of natural resources and environment for the Government Accountability Office, said in an interview. "This is one option. This is the beginning of the debate on how to position ourselves to meet these challenges."

Nazzaro was among those who testified last week before the House Appropriations Committee's interior subcommittee about moving the Forest Service to Interior. The committee controls the purse strings for the Forest Service, even though it is part of Agriculture, and the Interior Department.

During the hearing, subcommittee chairman Norm Dicks, D-Wash., said that "we regularly see inconsistencies" between how the Forest Service and the Interior Department handle public lands,

adding that there was "room for more collaboration" to make land management more effective and efficient.

In a later interview, however, Dicks said he found the GAO report, which he had requested, inconclusive. Though not ruling the switch out entirely, Dicks said, "I came out of the hearing thinking it would be better to leave things as they are."

The issue isn't new. It has been explored five times in the past four decades, including during the Nixon, Carter and Reagan administrations. In several cases, actual legislation was drafted. The proposals never got off the ground, however, blocked by interest groups or Capitol Hill politics.

Several of the proposals called for establishing a separate Department of Natural Resources, which would include the Forest Service, the Interior Department's three land agencies and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, which is part of the Commerce Department.

The Carter administration said such a combination could save \$160 million over several years. The Nixon administration made similar proposals, including one to create a Department of Environment and Natural Resources that would include many of the functions now handled by the Environmental Protection Agency, which was established in 1970.

Among other things, the Reagan administration proposed streamlining operations by transferring almost 20 million acres of BLM lands to the Forest Service and almost 14 million acres of Forest Service land to the BLM.

"All these failed because of political decisions at the time or the environment at the time just changed," Nazzaro said.

The Interior Department was established in 1849 and given authority over the public lands acquired as the nation expanded westward. Then in 1905, Congress transferred control of what were then called the forest reserves to the Agriculture Department, where they were combined with the department's forestry research program into the Forest Service. Those pushing the creation of the new agency said the nation's forest and timber supply would be better managed by Agriculture Department officials.

There are 155 national forests, encompassing 193 million acres.

The impact on the public and the timber industry of moving the Forest Service to Interior is unclear, though campgrounds and trails in the national forests are well used and the federal forests, especially in the Northwest, used to be a major source of the nation's timber.

Mike Dombeck has seen the federal land management agencies from both sides. During the Clinton administration, Dombeck served as both chief of the Forest Service and as acting director of the BLM.

"If I were designing a new organization from scratch today ... I can think of no reason that we would have two agencies with nearly identical land stewardship missions under different Cabinet secretaries, different congressional committees' jurisdiction, reporting to different departments," Dombeck said.

The Forest Service is often seen as the odd agency out at the Agriculture Department, Dombeck said. The Forest Service and Interior have very different cultures but share a strong resistance to organization change, he said.

"While I can't conclude that moving the Forest Service to Interior should never be done, I'm skeptical the benefits would exceed costs at this time," he said.

Mark Rey, who oversaw the Forest Service as an undersecretary of agriculture under President George W. Bush, agreed. Rey said the agencies

already have a unified command to fight wildfires, and questions about encroaching development on forest lands is a state or local zoning issue. The Forest Service and Interior's U.S. Geological Survey are cooperating on climate-change research, he noted.

If change is needed, Rey said, a new natural resources department should be formed involving all the land agencies and the National Marine Fisheries Service.

"In for a dime, in for a dollar," Rey said.

ON THE WEB

To view the Government Accountability Office report:

www.gao.gov/new.items/d09223.pdf

State by state statistics:

www.wildlandfire.com/docs/2007..._data-public-land.htm

The Department of Interior Web site:

www.doi.gov

The U.S. Forest Service Web site:

www.fs.fed.us

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