



March 9, 2020

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The Honorable Sonny Perdue
Secretary of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave., S.W.
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Mr. Secretary,

There are windows and there are doors, some are open, and some are closed. You challenged us in Asheville, NC in September of 2018 with an open window to highlight and address some of the most pressing issues impacting the ability of the Forest Service to get work accomplished. We truly appreciate your leadership especially with the ESA and CEQ regulations. Reform of these regulations will most certainly enhance workforce capacity. We completed our analysis of workforce capacity based on your challenge and provided our recommendations and thoughts to you seven months ago (July 2019).

As requested last October, we believe a meeting with members of our Board, especially now, would provide an opportunity to fully brief you on how these administrative issues (described below) are negatively impacting the capacity of the field. To facilitate Board attendance and reduce travel expenses we would prefer to schedule a meeting during one of your trips west.

We understand there are many realities that influence your ability to embrace the workforce capacity issue fully and we appreciate that difficulty. Our National Association of Forest Service Retirees Board has just met to look at where we should put our volunteer energy and focus over the next year. Based on your interest in improving the performance of the Forest Service and your commitment to make a positive difference, we want to stay focused on how we can assist you in doing that.

Most conclusions and recommendations in our report were centered on doing all that can be done to improve capacity of the field force. Three of the six main points of the report were to mitigate the harm of centralizing administrative processes which directly and negatively affect the authorities granted to field managers. Based on our analysis and our opinion, as well as on-going interviews with agency field managers, this would be the next best area to make significant improvements in productivity service wide. To be clear, we are not suggesting that all centralization is bad, however, the litmus test must be measured by the effect on field operations. Just a sample of our concerns are the overall hiring process, authorities removed from field line officers, administrative burdens placed on field personnel, and moving critical business operations away from decision makers.

Since our original recommendations, additional centralization has continued to be undertaken, which we believe in effect complicates the work of those at the field level. Therefore, we believe the continuous centralization needs to stop, slow down, and even reverse course on some actions already taken. Mr. Secretary, centralization of authority in Washington harms local communities, public resources, and is counter to what made the Forest Service a successful and productive agency at its best.

We recommend that you charter a highly talented team of Department and Agency staff, including field personnel and retirees, to search out processes and procedures that limit or harm field productivity and implement those recommended actions immediately.

Making significant progress on these very doable actions will certainly stand as evidence of your commitment to improve the agency and prepare its workforce to meet the future needs of national forest and grasslands resources and the American people.

Thank you for allowing us to be a part of your legacy.

Sincerely,

James L. Caswell

James L. Caswell, Chair
National Association of Forest Service Retirees

Cc: Jim Hubbard
Doug Crandall
Lauren Sullivan
Chief Christiansen