

# **Transcript of NAFSR Zoom Meeting**

## **On Forest Service Reorganization**

### **with Associate Chief Chris French, May 20, 2026**

Bill Avey: This is Chris French, our Associate Chief of the Forest Service, and he's going to respond to the 30 questions that we sent on behalf of all of our membership.

Chris: Okay

Bill Avey: And then when he gets done, he's open doing Q&As. And I think, Chris, you said you had about 90 minutes with us, correct?

Chris: No, I'll take what we need to do.

Chris: Thanks, Bill. You're welcome, Bill. So just to be really straight with everybody, one, I want to say thank you for jumping on the call. If you've never met me, I'm Chris French. I'm the associate chief right now. Sometimes I wonder for how long, but right now I am.

Chris: I worked for the agency for 34 years. I started out in Region 3, as a seasonal rec/fire person like a lot of folks did in the agency, and my background was in wildlife, and I was a biologist. My 1st permanent position was a 13 and 13 engine foreman, and then I kind of worked from there in a variety of places.

Chris: You know, when we were talking to Becky Heath and Bill about the letter you guys sent in with your questions, I just realized the clearance processes that we go through with the department, and I basically said, this many questions, you're not going to see a response back on this for, like, 6 weeks, and it's going to be heavily managed by the department. Maybe it's just better we get on the phone, and I'll just give you some straight responses on things where I don't have to go through that same sort of clearance processes. And that's where this led from. It's 30 questions, and you're going to hear me kind of manage through these pretty quickly, but I've put up 90 minutes, and I want to make sure we can open up broader questions as we go forward. So that was sort of my intention.

Chris: All right, so the first question is, what are the key justifications to trigger this reorganization? Primarily, we were told to.

Chris: The secretary announced across USDA for all agencies that they wanted to see us remove middle management from our organizations and in our case, to move the

headquarters to the West. In her words, to be closer to the farmers, ranchers, others that are a part of the lands that we manage.

Chris: I don't know how to get past that. We were told to. But what I would also share to you with all of this is that there are many parts of this reorganization that we need to do, and those are things that we've been working on for years. We probably just never felt like we had the opportunity or maybe the political will to make some of those changes. What do I mean by that?

Chris: We've seen a decrease in our non-fire workforce across the agency by at least 40% over the last 15 to 20 years because we've been moving people to basically wildland fire positions. The whole makeup of the agency has shifted dramatically. This has been fueling the lack of capacity at districts and forests in recreation, natural resource management, and others during a time of relatively flat budgets, unless we get one-time monies that have been coming in, like IRA, like IJA, things like disaster funds.

Chris: What has been happening over time is that we've essentially become pretty top-heavy, and many field units have either been consolidated or they're not staffed properly. I didn't check the numbers today, but last week, I had 89 of our ranger districts that were staffed by less than 9 people. And of those 89, I think in the 1960s, they had 6 people or less. This is the crisis that you see occurring, at the field level.

Chris: I can't increase staffing in the agency. I've been told by the last administration and this administration we have to staff within the budgets we're getting from Congress.

Chris: That amount of budget I get from Congress on both the fire and non-fire side puts us at somewhere around 28,000 employees to 29,000 employees, and that's the congressional budget. And so, essentially, what we're trying to do is take the capacity we have and better apply it to those places in the field that are lacking it.

Chris: But you can't take a GS14 and put them down on a district that is primarily 11s and 12s. And that's why you see us doing this service center approach.

Chris: So that in the next years, we're trying to manage our capacity that way, where we have service... when I say a service center, it's groups of people that were previously part of our regional offices or Washington office helping do NEPA projects, helping special use authorizations. Those sorts of things. That's why we need to do this now. A year ago, before DRP, it was just under 5,000 employees that were a part of our regional offices and our Washington office outside of business operations. We've lost about 30% of those through DRP and others, but if you think about that in terms of the broader agency, it's still a high number of folks. There were 6,500 people that we sent letters to. We generally think outside of business operations, about a third of them will remain part of the oversight of the agency,

and two-thirds of them we're going to try to focus on the specialized teams, and then over time, as we see attrition in the agency, higher entry-level positions on forest and districts.

Chris: Second question was, how do you know if this is working? What are the metrics you're going to look at?

Chris: A big part of this is the employee piece that I just talked about. It's also around facilities. I'll show you the data a little later. We have 16,000 facilities right now that are basically rated at a condition level that is unacceptable. In 50% of them the maintenance is so bad, we shouldn't even be putting people into them. And I can show you that data. We have gotten to a point where, of the facilities we have, our leases will outstrip the entire budget we have for leasing and maintaining our buildings by the end of this year. We had to make a change.

Chris: That's what's driving a lot of this. So, one of the first metrics we're looking at is decreased facilities cost that starts to bring in. This is least cost, especially, that allows us to essentially have the right level of maintenance to have a more sustainable facilities footprint. We're measuring that.

Chris: The second thing is we're looking at a net increase of program dollars, dollars in recreation, dollars in range that are not salary and expense, but program dollars hitting the field at a district level. That there should be an overall, and we're setting targets of what that looks like, of net increase of those dollars. And then the final thing is looking at the program of works, and aligning that, basically, of whether it's field-directed or management-directed. And making shifts for our FTEs so that you are essentially creating net increases in FTEs that are directly serving field units.

Chris: Question number four was what are your cost savings on this?

Chris: What's the expected cost?

Chris: We're still trying to figure out the expected cost. There were about 500 employees that we let know you may be relocated. The highest expense we have in this is transfer of station. That can range anywhere from \$35,000 to \$150,000, depending on the type of relocation they take. That's a lot of money.

Chris: We are trying to minimize relocations as much as we can. We're looking for offices within the local commuting area, we're looking at consolidating offices as much as we can, so we're not having to pay relocation expenses.

Chris: But in the areas that we're generally expecting to need to move people, you can do the math. If I take the highest number and say that it's \$150,000 and you're moving 100 people, you know, it's a lot of money.

Chris: What are the cost savings on the other side? The first one is decreased lease costs. That's something we're tracking very closely. So, I'll take the building we're in here that you all know, Yates.

Chris: The Yates building costs us around \$12 million a year between security and lease fees. Right now, we occupy it at 40%. By next year, we'll be on a single floor, and those costs will be down to around \$2 million.

Chris: It's the same thing with our Atlanta office, our Milwaukee office, which we were already looking to consolidate.

Chris: The first thing we're really looking at for two reasons is decreasing our lease costs. I think in terms of other cost savings, what we're putting together right now is metrics that is more about... and I would say, think about it like you think about indirects on a contract, or a partner agreement? What are the indirects of the agency? What are the costs for management and indirects, and are we lowering them to put more capacity to the field? Those are the ways we're trying to track right now, that cost-benefit ratio.

Chris: It says, since funding for this reorganization is not included in the President's budget, what's the plan for paying for the reorganization? Well, the President's budget isn't the budget we work under.

Chris: The budget we work under is the budget given to us from Congress. And this has been one of the biggest questions that I have to deal with all the time, because the president's budget hammers this agency, zeroes out research and development, zeroes out state and private, moves wildland fire out of the agency, and this has been for the past two years, you know these things. The congressional budget is the one that we've aligned the reorganization to, and that's where we would be basically creating our costs. Now, there is language in the current budget that essentially makes us notify and work with Congress on reorganization pieces. It's under the reprogramming language. We were working with our attorneys to make sure we're aligned with that.

Chris: But the other piece, and if you know anything about the agency's finances, there's also a lot of pre-prior year funds that don't have that reprogramming issues, and we have those on hand to help pay for the employee pieces that we've identified our limits for that, and where the money would come from.

Chris: Do you believe the Forest Service will be more or less capable of filling this mission with fewer people after these changes? I don't think that we are funded right now to fulfill our full mission on any congressional budget or president's budget I've seen. I think the agency is significantly underfunded and understaffed to deliver our full mission. I just want to say that up front.

Chris: If we're going to live within what the Congress is giving us as a budget, this is the best way we have of delivering the widest amount of our mission, so that we have more people focusing on the operations of the agency than we do on the overhead of the agency.

Chris: That's the best bottom line I can give you. I don't think they would have to triple our budget for us to really be able to meet many of the things that Congress has asked us to do.

Chris: I don't think we're gonna have fewer people at this point and let me tell you why. I think we're gonna have the amount of people we have right now. That's not me saying that I don't think we're gonna lose some people in this reorganization. I know we will. There are people right now that are ready to take VERA and VSIP. I know that, and I don't want to don't want to lose them. We're doing our best to retain as many people as we can, but we will. But we're now under our budget thresholds from Congress, and I can hire back anybody that we lose. You're going to see us start to open up external hiring.

Chris: We're gonna start that at the field level on districts to build back our capacity there. I think we've got 50 jobs we're about ready to start offering in the next month, that'll be our first external hiring that we've done outside of FHIR in 2 years.

Chris: Because we're now in that budget threshold. I don't see us going to fewer employees, but I want to be clear, I think we'll lose some people in this reorganization. We will hire people, but it will be primarily at the field level.

Chris: How will the reorganization make implementation of requirements like NEPA and ESA more efficient?

Chris: Well, there's been a lot of policy changes that make those more efficient already. Whether you agree with those or not, but I do know that we're going to be able to bring more people specifically around NEPA and ESA to bear that can bring more capacity to help us, whether it's on NEPA strike teams or consultation teams that are presently doing program management that we're going to focus on doing project authorization now. And I do think it's going to help us do that more effectively and efficiently.

Chris: How will historical artifacts in the Yates Building, like the Chief's desk, be preserved when the Chief is relocated to Salt Lake? What about artifacts and historical documents located in regional offices that will be closed?

Chris: So here in the Yates building, we're not moving the chief's desk. We're maintaining the chief's office in DC. That will remain here, as will the various artifacts that are throughout the Yates building. We've been inventorying those. They will be consolidated to the fourth floor. We're not expecting to lose anything.

Chris: In terms of our regional offices, we have put together a small team, it's just forming, that is looking at not just artifact retention, record retention, and other work data that we need to make sure that whenever we're transitioning an office from a facility move, that goes with us. We're not losing things. We've had contacts with both the museum and the Forest Historical Society about how they can retain pieces. We're putting together a team on that this week, actually, that is developing the standards and the ways that we're gonna do that, and then they'll start reaching out. I'm not expecting that you're gonna lose anything from this office and in the regional offices. We're putting together the protocols of how to manage that right now. And remember, it's only 3 regional offices right now. It's Portland, Milwaukee, and Atlanta, which are all basically in downtown corporate buildings. There's not anything historical here associated with the building itself, although there are the artifacts that are within.

Chris: As part of the reorganization, is it expected that funding will be shifted to state or private entities? No. I don't believe so. I haven't seen that. I think we continue working through our shared stewardship agreements and other agreements that are a normal part of business but have nothing to do with reorganization.

Chris: Question #9, how many people or positions will this reorganization move or eliminate?

Chris: There are about 500 people that we've notified we may potentially move them. We've been working over the course of the last weeks to minimize that and reduce that, and that number will be lower. I can't say specifically what it is right now, but we're working through it. We've been identifying office space within the local community area around some of the places where we said people may be moved. We're trying to work through that right now, but that number will be lower.

Chris: I want to be really careful about the way I answer this next question, which is, you asked, what positions will be eliminated?

Chris: Nobody is being RIF'd. Nobody will lose their grade. We will offer them positions that retain their grades. We will offer them transfer of station if they go to a new office. There are positions that are being eliminated, the position, but the people occupying those will be given positions of the same grade and essentially the same series, but they'll have different duties.

Chris: So let me give you a clear example of that. We have regional foresters. Those positions are being eliminated, but those regional foresters are going to be taking other positions in the new organization. Anywhere from the chief of operations or a state

director. This is gonna be the same thing for the GS15 and below staff that we have right now. Nobody's being RIF'd.

Chris: There are positions that are being relocated. There's about 500 of those. We're trying to minimize that and get that number lower, but no people will be eliminated. There will be positions that we'll no longer continue to have.

Chris: On NPR, the chief said several times that only 500 employees would move, yet I heard him also say 200-plus employees from the WO will need to relocate, and all the regional offices will be closed, which means all those employees will be relocating to forests or service centers. That is considerably more than 500 employees. Can you please help us understand? 500 employees are expected to be moved. Also, why did approximately 6,000 employees receive letters?

Chris: If you worked in a regional office or here in the National Capital Region or, if you worked in research and development, you received a letter that said you were subject to reorganization. There are about 6,500 letters that went out. Many of those people, when we say you're subject to reorganization, means your reporting structure will change.

Chris: Doesn't mean your job's going to change. You're going to continue to do our work or you're going to continue to do grants and agreements work. You may continue to do, you know, trails, support work, but your reporting structure will change. We're eliminating regional forester management levels, so we had to notify everybody of that across the board.

Chris: If you are working in a regional office other than Portland, Milwaukee or Atlanta, you are not being relocated. You're not being asked to move anywhere, you can stay right where you're at. Now, your position may be aligned differently into the future organization. Again, it's collapsing the Washington office and regional offices.

Chris: You may be asked to be part of a broader set of services that is being provided down to forests, but we're not repeating regional offices. As an example, if I'm sitting in Missoula, I can stay there. And I may be servicing the national leadership organization, or I may be part of a service team that is providing direct NEPA support, wildlife support, special uses support, grants and agreements support to a forest. That's the way it's going to work. But we're not asking people to move.

Chris: Of the offices where we're asking people to move, it is primarily because of their leases. There are not that many people there.

Chris: In Milwaukee, it's under 60. And in Portland, that number is higher. I think it is around 150. The biggest number is actually coming out of here, the National Capital Region. There

are 393 employees that work out of the National Capital Region. 130 of those will be able to stay. And some of those we've been negotiating, that number will actually be a little higher.

Chris: There's about 260 that got notices that said they will potentially be relocated. And the reason I say potentially is that if you're covered by the bargaining unit, by the union, we have to negotiate with them.

Chris: About 260 people here. Now, there's been some shifts and changes in the last weeks that should bring that number down. But that's why you're seeing us say 500 people.

Chris: It's not the huge number of people that people think are still in these offices, because both the Milwaukee and the Atlanta office, under the last administration, moved most people out to forests. They're not working out of the regional offices anymore, in that physical office. They may be still tied to the region, but they are out in other duty locations. So that's why you're seeing us say those numbers, okay?

Chris: That was the first 10 questions.

Chris: I'm ready to go into the next 10, but I'll pause there to see if anybody's got a question.

Bill Avey: I see one hand from Catherine and Tim.

Kathryn and Tim: Hey, Chris, it's Catherine. I'm in the basement. You keep talking about regional offices. As you know, Ogden is also closing, and the expectation, I guess, is that those employees are going to commute up to 45 to 50 miles. Could you just talk a little bit about that?

Chris: Yeah, and that's changed a little bit, Catherine. So, the Ogden office is not going to close, the lease there in the GSA building will change. They're no longer kicking us out, maybe I'll put it that way. But we're not building a new office in Ogden, and so it is a combination of both. It is in the local commuting area. There will be people that will commute to Salt Lake, and there will be people that remain in Ogden, at least in the next few years.

Kathryn and Tim: And can you just talk how you define commuting area?

Chris: There's very specific direction, Catherine, of how we have to look at that. I think it's within 50 miles.

Chris: But I will have to give you the specifics back.

Kathryn and Tim: Well, because air miles versus driving miles, you know, that's...

Chris: Oh, no. Yeah, I get that. I mean, we're following the definition that's defined, I think, by GSA or OPM or one of the two. And I probably should have that right at my fingertips, but

I don't. But I know I've asked this question a bunch of times. We have to make sure that we're managing it the same way in every place.

Frank Beum: Lakewood office. When I was there, we were looking at, when the lease was going to run out, we were going to move over to the Federal Center. Any update on that? Right now, it sounds like Lakewood Office stays in play.

Chris: Lakewood office is going to stay in place. The terms and the costs of that lease are considerably less right now than some of our others. Again, we're doing the ones that are costing us the most that we can get done right now. When we looked at those costs and the terms that they were giving us, there wasn't a need to make that move right now, and you can certainly reach out to Troy and ask him a little bit more about that if you want to.

Frank Beum: Copy. Thanks.

Bill Avey: All right, any other questions on the first 10 questions?

Stephen Weaver: The Southern Forest Retirees Association members and on the board were interested in the 28-29,000 employees that you're capped at, how much of that is fire staffing?

Chris: A little under 11,000.

Stephen Weaver: Thank you. And then I'm particularly interested in the status of the fire management leadership across government. Can you speak to that?

Chris: I think what you're getting at is, are we changing fire management to meet what the President's budget said about combining it over with DOI? Is that what you're asking, Steven?

Stephen Weaver: Well, I understand that's, you know, the sitting over this whole thing, but what currently is that?

Chris: Alright, so our focus right now is to... we're not changing anything with fire at a forest level and below.

Chris: That's the first thing. Any resource that is assigned, whether it's a forest FMO or in California, a chief one, nothing will change in terms of the resources that are there, engines, shot crews, things like that. But we are aligning what would have been the Regional staffs and the Washington office staff into a single team. And the responsibilities they had for delivering our aviation program, our safety program, the business management pieces of FHIR are being aligned together like we're doing with the rest of the regional Washington office folks. We just had a meeting on that yesterday. We're working through how to do that, but that's the bigger piece, okay?

Chris: Yep. All right. I'm going to get into the next questions. Number 11, how many experienced personnel, firefighters, ecologists, land managers are expected to leave or already departed under this plan? We're not aware of anybody that's left yet.

Chris: We did see attrition, right after the first of the year. We have not seen a change in our regular expected attrition since we have announced this plan. That's the way I want to put it. And if you don't believe me, again, I would show I can bring up a dashboard that shows you month by month attrition compared to previous years. Since we announced the reorganization, we haven't seen a significant change.

Chris: The question that always comes to me, which I think is getting at this, is that there's a figure put out there all the time about when the BLM moved its headquarters to Grand Junction, that they basically lost the majority of their employees when they did it. I don't know the number of people we're going to lose. I can't predict that. But I do not think it's going to be at those levels. And I'm going to tell you why.

Chris: When I got asked to help figure out how you do some of this, one of the things that was front and center in my mind, because we have employees that we gained that I work with that were went through that reorganization. And I have friends over in BLM that went through it. And I asked him what do you do differently in a situation like this? What was it like and what do you do differently? I've also heard from people that were part of the consolidation of the Albuquerque Service Center, things we did.

Chris: What was your experience? What would you do differently? How do you retain people? I don't have control that I'm being told to reorganize. How do I try to retain people? Because I've been able to negotiate and push off the table any potential RIF's or things like that.

Chris: What I heard was, in both cases, that most employees essentially got a letter that said, this is your new job, you have to report in 30 days to this location, either Grand Junction or Albuquerque, and you have 24 hours to decide, or we'll offer you a separation from the agency. I've heard that from BLM employees, and I've heard that from our employees. We're not doing that. Like, that's the biggest shift. We're not doing that.

Chris: Today, I offer to affected employees voluntary reassignments to nine different duty locations if they want to go. We'll pay their transfer station. They'll keep their positions. We won't relocate them again. Their choices. We're gonna offer them choices of positions that are on forests, where we need people. And then we're going to offer them choices of positions in multiple locations in any of the service centers that we have right now and have duty stations on for us right now. We've given them a lot of warnings. We're bringing in teams of people right now working with us to build out the future organization, and we're

trying to make sure that we're giving people plenty of choice. Whether it's voluntary, like our regional folks, we've said we won't actually direct you to move until this fall. Our intention over the next months is to offer many rounds of voluntary opportunities for them if they're going to be relocated. That's what we're doing different, and I hope that it retains as many people as we can.

Chris: We've heard that you had people sign non-disclosure and loyalty agreements. Is this true? How does this demonstrate transparency?

Chris: We've never asked anybody to sign a loyalty agreement. I don't even know what that is. But we did ask people to sign a non-disclosure agreement right before the announcement, right before it. And then we got rid of the NDA. Let me tell you why. The last thing I need is somebody in this agency to hear about their job and how it's going to be affected from somebody from Congress or from a leak inside the agency rather than from me or the chief. One of the things that we thought was incredibly important was that we were going to tell our employees first, and then we were going to sit down and tell Congress and go through it.

Chris: And so, in order to do that we sent our regional foresters and our entire executive leadership team to every office that we could that was going to be affected by this, so we could sit down with people, one-on-one, in groups, and talk with them about it.

Chris: We put together an employee meeting across the agency that the chief and I led to talk directly to our employees. In order to do that, those two things, we needed, like, 40 people, to support us. We asked folks to sign a non-disclosure agreement so they would not leak any details of the organization before we could talk to our employees. I didn't want them to read it in Reddit. I didn't want it on Facebook, or in a news story, or from Congress. That's a value that I think is important for our employees, and for me as a leader. So yeah, I had people sign non-disclosure agreements in those two weeks prior to us making this announcement, and then after that, they don't.

Chris: It wasn't a loyalty agreement, and it was done because employees need to hear from me and from the chief before they hear it from anybody else. If you disagree with that decision or you don't like it, I get it. But that's what it is.

Chris: 13. What is the proposed structure of the state offices? Will those directed reassignments be considered managerial forced moves? As such, will relocations be paid for?

Chris: State offices are going to be essentially anywhere from 5 to 10 people staffing a state director. Right now, we've got that organization around eight people, with the difference being California, that's slightly higher because of how large it is.

Chris: The state director is a career SES reserved position. Anybody that is assigned to do that, whether they voluntarily, and I've already got some people that have voluntarily requested to be part of that, or we have assigned them. They will maintain their grades. We will pay for their transfer station.

Chris: Question #14. What is the reporting structure between state offices and service centers? How will the consolidation of functions into the new service centers be different and work more effectively than the centralization of HR into Albuquerque? This was a big question for us. There are parts of our business operations piece that USDA is taking on.

Chris: We have people that are part of our regional offices that are going to be providing services, like I talked about earlier, like NEPA, or, our bridges and dam teams, or our facilities teams and lands folks that will be essentially working from regional offices that are now service centers and directly applying work to their forests, to the forests, the state offices, or the state directors are responsible for bringing in those services to the service levels, and making sure that we're providing the right delivery level to our forests. And that is everything from HR, to grants and agreements, to contracting, to NEPA. To any of those things that are working in one of those service centers, we have defined customer service delivery levels at that state level.

Chris: Every forest that is underneath that we're dividing, creating teams that service that level of needs for that area, that state. If you're in the state of Oregon, the forest in Oregon, there will be teams in all those areas that deliver the level of services to those forests. The accountability for us delivering those is through the state director.

Chris: Question #15, what analysis was done to inform reorganization decisions and are those reports available? Do they demonstrate that there will not be impacts to national forest resources, watershed conditions, threatened endangered species, recreation opportunities, acres burned, etc., to this reorganization?

Chris: The second part of that question, I haven't seen any analysis that worked on this that gets to that level of the question just asked. I think there's always an assumption in the analysis that we're doing that we want to try to increase our effectiveness of delivering all those resources. I'm going to answer the first part, but I just want to say I've looked at now almost 30 different analyses that have been done since the late 90's and early 2000's up until 2024 that we used to inform this reorganization. We will make them publicly available. We're about ready to make them available to the Government Accountability Office, so they're sitting with OGC right now to go through review. But let me tell you what's in there.

Chris: There's the 2007 transformation document. There are 3 separate analyses that were done on R&D over the last 15 years to look at how you might... how you need to change

things. There's our facilities analysis. There was analysis that was done in 2024 that looked at consolidating regions, creating skinny regions, having no regions, to get to staffing levels to meet budget intent. And just to be honest with you, this was in the last administration, we were looking at staffing levels that we'd have to cut that were north of 9,000 people.

Chris: So, I've seen a lot worse. I've seen all the analysis that was led into many of these things. There's almost 40 of them. I've seen an analysis that the southern region did where they were basically comparing different sites and recommending three years ago that we move out of Atlanta and go to Athens. I've included that in what we're providing to GAO, and we will make that public. I've seen the analysis that was done by region nine to look at the Milwaukee office and make recommendations about where they should go and it was to Madison. I've included that analysis. So, I just want to be really clear with everybody. I've worked for this agency a long time. I have sat in meeting after meeting over years where we talk about stuff, like the facilities cliff we've been in. Like the top heaviness we have, or the need to make change, I've watched how we basically have never done it. And we had an opportunity, because we were being told to.

Chris: With reorganization we can actually start to address some of the things that have been around. The analogy I have, it's like we've had a car that we've been looking at for years and years and years where we just don't ever do maintenance on it. All we do is put gas in it. And we just expect it to go and go and go. And over time, we're starting to see failures. And we're seeing it right now.

Chris: We don't have the capacity we need in multiple places, in regions, in the Washington office, like our lands team has been decimated. If we do not make changes, we're not going to be able to meet the mission. We have looked at nearly 40 different analyses that have been done since 1996, to inform us where we're going. We will make those available. Many of those are available online right now.

Chris: What alternatives were considered to this plan?

Chris: I can describe them broadly. I can say for our national headquarters of when we were directed to establish our headquarters in the West, we looked at Phoenix, Albuquerque, Denver, Salt Lake, Boise, Missoula.

Chris: We compared those locations in terms of cost of living, available space that we already had where we didn't have to construct something new, quality of living, basically housing costs, cost of living, I mean, across the board. We also looked at airports. How easy it was it to reach?

Chris: Our forests that were in Florida, New Hampshire, Alaska, Washington, California and D.C. When we looked at all those and we scored those out, Salt Lake City came in on top.

Partially because it had the best cost of living score. It had the best airport for the things we were looking at. And frankly, we had an office space there that was 15% or so utilization. We had just redone and put millions of dollars in about five years before. And it was just sitting there almost vacant. We were about ready to give it up.

Chris: We also looked at skinny regions. What do I mean by that? Keeping 9 regions, but staffing them, let's say, with 100 to 150 people. We looked at consolidated regions, basically having east, central, and west. We looked at no regions. We did very similar things for R&D.

Chris: Question #17. How does the movement of the chief to Salt Lake City bring leadership closer to the field and align with the movement of R&D to a few locations, which moves researchers away from field sites where they work?

Chris: The majority of our forested acres are sitting in the Intermountain West and the West.

Chris: You know, we were directed to do this. I'm going to probably leave that there. I mean, the chief in Salt Lake will be physically closer to the majority of acres in the national forest system.

Chris: In terms of research and development, I think one of the things that has been the hardest struggle here has been that. The budget that came out from the president that essentially zeroed out state and private, R&D, cut NFS by 30%, and removed fire out of this agency, along with the R&D announcement on this closure. We did not get our messaging right, and that's on us.

Chris: A couple of things here. One of them is, is that we were trying to make sure any employee that we might consolidate their office and they were subject to reorganization, got a letter. And so that got interpreted as closing offices.

Chris: The reality and what we've changed all our language to, but it hasn't changed, I think, the scare tactics, or the scared... people being scared about things because of, especially the President's budget.

Chris: This is the reality of what we're doing. Right now, there are about 1,100 people in research and development. They are assigned to nearly 170 facilities. Of those 170 facilities, around 50% of our R&D staffing is at 20 facilities.

Chris: Like the Riverside Lab as an example, Fire Sciences Lab.

Chris: When you saw the 20 facilities come out that we said we're not evaluating, it's because that's where the majority of our R&D employees are.

Chris: That means that there are about 500 to 600 people that are scattered across 150 facilities. Those are the facilities that we're evaluating.

Chris: We do not intend to move researchers out of the locality of where they're at. We do not intend to close experimental forests. What we do intend to do is consolidate our facilities into something more sustainable. And this is hard.

Chris: I think the messaging got really messed up on this. We're doing our best to try to align that, and that's on us. But we're going through and evaluating those facilities. Some of those we've looked at and said, no, this makes no sense. You don't close this. The example I would give is like up on the Okanagan Wenatchee.

There are other sites we need to be looking at hard. As much as I think everybody loves the Stoneville research site in Mississippi, there's 14 buildings there and we staff it with four people.

Chris: I have to manage our facilities somehow. And unfortunately, R&D has more examples like that than others.

Chris: I've got a district ranger office that is leased in that Stoneville site right up the road. We're looking at it right now. Is it better to move that district ranger office to Stoneville and use the facilities there or invest in a better office for essentially the district ranger's office and move the four people in Stoneville there? That's what we mean by evaluating.

Chris: We have multiple sites where we have multiple facilities, NFS, state and private, and R&D, all within the same locality area, and most of them are underutilized.

Chris: And we're trying to have frank conversations with our partners. We have experimental forests where we have facilities that we don't staff anybody at, and they are primarily used by universities and others. And we're saying, you want to take these on? Because right now they represent tens of millions of dollars of deferred maintenance and other maintenance and utility costs that I can't afford to pay. That's the conversation we're trying to have.

Chris: We're not trying to move scientists. We don't want to lose the data that they have, but we also have to make sound facilities decisions.

Chris: Will the new state directors be SES employees or political appointees? They've been advertised as SES career reserved employees, not as SES political appointees. The exact same positions we use for regional foresters. The same type of position. They are career reserved employees. They are using the same series that we use for our district rangers, our forest supervisors, our regional foresters, and most of the deputy chiefs, the 340 series. They will not be political appointees.

Chris: How will the new structure maintain a geographic balance in agency policy and connections with states? The shift to 11 western state offices covering 16 states and four eastern offices covering 33 states diminishes Forest Service customer service to much of the population in timber lands.

Chris: I just disagree with the premise of the question completely. We're creating one-on-one relationships with state forests, state foresters, and other federal agencies in the places where the majority of our lands are in the West.

Chris: In the East, we're going basically from two regional offices servicing those 33 states to four. We're actually creating a much narrower set of relationships, a much more focused set of relationships. I'm not sure what the broader view is there, but from my assessment, you're actually creating a much more focused set of relationships, as we're moving forward in our management.

Chris: What is the vision for an agency communication program? Will all such work be centralized in Salt Lake headquarters or in the remaining Washington office? Will new state offices be empowered to communicate and identify priorities?

Chris: There will be communication experts in our State Director's offices. It's one of the key positions. Like if we look at what the staff is that works for a state director, external affairs, tribal relations, communications. Those are all there. Like that's the key things that you need to have as well as like a chief of staff type role. And then there's others.

Chris: There will be communications folks that are here in DC. There's about 130 people that will remain here in DC. One of the central sets of comms folks that needs to be here and works with USDA are our communications folks. They will be aligned as one organization with the folks that are in Salt Lake City. Remember, our headquarters will be in Salt Lake City, and the folks that remain here in DC are basically part of our headquarters out of Salt Lake.

That's the way it will work. I guess to answer the question really directly, what's the vision for our agency communication program? And will people be empowered to communicate the answers? Yes, that's what we intend to do. And we recognize that the power of our communication comes not just from that national organization but empowering our PAOs and others on districts and others to be able to communicate what we're doing on the ground. All right, that was the second 20 set of questions.

R. Hennes: Chris, my question has to do with foresters. I was wondering how the state offices feel and the new state directors will affect the role of forest supervisors and their personal one-on-one relationships with state fish and game DNR water resources. Do you

feel that there potentially could be a significant level of political complexity taken away from our four supervisors with the stacking of state directors now in place?

Chris: Well, I don't think so. I mean, there's always potential, and it's going to be different everywhere you go, Robert. You compare the state of Michigan with Alaska with California. It's such different complexity.

Chris: You know, one of the things we've heard really clearly through the comments that came in from reorganization, and I'm going to say this was from governors' offices, state foresters, state game and fish agencies, the recreation tourism boards, but also through our NGOs, that one of the complaints that folks have with us is they don't... it's really hard for them, let's say in the state of California, to feel like they're working with 17 different forest services.

Chris: Or in the state of Michigan, maybe three separate forest services between the Huron-Manistee, Ottawa, and Hiawatha.

Chris: That's their experience. Now, we never see it that way. We always think about we have to create a relationship there, but what they say is it's very tough to do that, because... and then if I'm doing it with a regional office, they've got multiple states they're looking at. This is where it came from. I do think there's learning for us to shift and change here. Our state directors will directly supervise our forest supervisors. I think that the state director will be the primary holder of a lot of relationships. There also is going to be the continued relationships we have with staff and fire levels.

Chris: On a grants and agreements level, that is happening with the state forester offices, and then the work that we're going to do on any one given national forest, you have to have that forest supervisor and the line leadership there involved.

Chris: But I do think I do think it will shift. But I think we're going to have to grow into that. This is probably the loudest thing we heard of change that people were asking for. When people came out and said, don't get rid of regional offices, it was usually followed with why you shouldn't and it was all about relationships. It was mostly about relationships, and what followed immediately was to maintain the relationships, and let me give you some advice of what our experience is, and why we need that. That's when we basically then start talking about, well, if that's what you're asking for. Maybe there's a different approach to it that is better. And when we brought out the state director concept, we heard pretty universally.

Jerry: You know, in gratitude, I'll ask you a bit of an impossible question, but help us to tease apart. In the larger context of the changes that the administration is applying to government as a whole and to the Forest Service from this reorganization in particular. You

mentioned things like the fire consolidation, the president's budget zeroing out state, private, and tribal, and research, and so those... it's hard to sort of look at the reorganization by itself without also looking at the larger churn. And I suspect that's true for many of us, as well as for people in the agency and in the public. How do we sort of sustain the level of trust to succeed in a reorganization at the same time that all this other bigger stuff is going on, if that makes sense.

Chris: Oh, totally. I mean, that's the biggest problem, right? When you look at the actions that this agency has received. Whether that is the firing of probationary employees. Or you look at what we experienced through DRP, which was just indiscriminate, now remember, I mean, people got to choose that on their own, but they chose it under fear, because it was under the guise of reorganization, and it was under the guise of what happened with probationary employees.

Chris: We didn't convert a lot of probationary employees because we weren't allowed to, because we didn't have the budget for it, which probably makes sense, to be frank. Now we're starting to because we have the budget for it. But the issue, I think, primarily comes down to is how do I trust this reorganization? It actually comes from the agency, which I think is the heart of your question.

Chris: And it's good for the agency when I'm seeing an administration that, essentially to the entire federal workforce, and to key parts of our mission in their budget and other actions, are not valuing that. Whether it's getting rid of research, whether it's getting rid of, say, private programs and saying states are gonna have to take this on. That's the crux we're in. It's the crux I'm in.

You know, I can't get past, nor do I fault, anyone that doesn't have trust for what we're doing right now, based on what they're seeing within the broader political spectrum. I don't know how else to say it. What I can tell you is that when I was brought in and told that you were going to reorganize and I was shown some of the directions that we were about ready to get which were dramatic. Not anywhere close to what you're seeing right now. I made a professional choice to stay. And to keep myself in that room and to basically try to negotiate out the best thing we could for this agency. And the way that I did that was to say, wait, wait, wait, wait. I get you want us to reorganize. Cool.

Chris: Look at this analyses I have. Look at all the studies we've done. We know we need to reorganize. Please don't give us directions that tell me I have to RIF an entire group of people. It makes no sense when I have a whole set of analysis from 2024, at the end of the last administration, going back into the 90s, that could actually inform us to do this better.

Chris: That's reality, Jerry. Now, what's also reality is that this proposed reorganization represents 80% of that work and 20% of direction we're getting from the department. That's the balance. I can't change the trust you all have or employees have about the broader context, but that's the answer I'm gonna tell you. I think that's what you were asking, right?

Jerry: Absolutely, thank you, and I asked it partly to sort of illustrate the position you and other agency leaders are in and thank you for making that choice.

Chris: Yeah, I mean, the question I keep getting is, why does this reorganization look so different than the president's budget? It does look completely different than the President's budget. It's following the Congressional budget, and it's following what I just told you.

Bill Avey: Okay, next question is Alex Friend.

Alex Friend: Yeah, hey, Chris. Thank you for doing this Q&A. Thank you also for being where you are. I know it comes at a cost, and it's much appreciated, your commitment to the agency. Thank you for clarifying about R&D. I, you know, certainly agree with Stoneville and similar cases, so that's long overdue, and that's a great anecdote. I hope the other cases are similar.

Chris: Alex, in our working with the department, the initial messaging that went out on this was confusing and bad and it's created this. Now, the silver lining is I think the outrage mixed with the president's budget; we suddenly have leaders like the Secretary talking about the importance of science.

Alex Friend: Yeah. Okay. Good.

Chris: Now, the biggest thing for me to do is to try to reduce the fear of our employees, and then do this facilities piece thoughtfully and right, but it can't change the way that all came out.

Alex Friend: Yep, that makes sense. The quick question I have is about optics. And to me, the optics are that research is not going to be embedded in the agency. It seems to be they're providing research locations, like the 20 example, but I'm concerned, you know, I spent a lot of my career trying to make a sort of one-agency paradigm, where stations were embedded with regions. And, you know, only a third of the research locations coincide with the state offices. The deputy chief is no longer part of the ELT. Just what do you have to say about integrating research as not separating R&D from NFS, but having it be one Forest Service in this new model.

Chris: You know, Alex, that's a super, super good point. We have done some of that. I don't know if it's at the level you're saying. It was done at a different level. So, I think when we're

all said and done on this, of the roughly 170 sites, you're gonna see us retain 100. And they're gonna be geographically distributed.

Chris: You all see the organizational chart that is out there about the future. Alright, if you know our future, our current agency, we essentially have 7 deputy chiefs. NFS, R&D, state and private, CFO, Business operations, workplace and the environment, and now fire. Because Congress told us to. We have seven deputy chiefs.

Chris: This organization basically goes to four, and they're not called deputy chiefs, they're called chiefs. Chief of Strategy and Performance, Chief Field Operations Officer, Chief Financial and Administrative Officer, Chief Fire and Safety Officer.

Chris: What you see here is an integration of research, state and private. And our operations side of things for the management of the National Forest System, all sitting under our operations piece. And the intention there is to integrate the delivery of those programs in a way that they're all working together and the outcomes of that through our state directors. I think your point in terms of the locations is something we need to look harder at, and I get it.

Chris: But that's the way it's currently being thought about being integrated. And the idea of that chief strategy and performance team, by the way, we have people like John Phipps working with us and Leslie Weldon. That office is intended to essentially set the metrics, the budgets, the staffing and basically the target outcomes for all of these operational areas, whether it's financial and administrative, or the chief field operations area that includes R&D, or our fire and safety, so that it's all being done together and integrated. It's very different, but it is much more integrated. All right.

Bill Avey: Thanks, Chris. We're down to the last 10, so I'll turn it over to you to push on.

Chris: All right, last 10.

Chris: How will technical expertise that was located at the regional level be provided? Examples are engineering, environmental engineers, structural engineers, architects, FERC relicensing, special use permitting. We're going to do this through the national organization through basically service delivery teams. And that's what we call our service centers, but they're part of the national organization. They will continue to provide those services, but even now, we have them operating as single teams across the agency. That'll be our approach.

Chris: We understand that service centers will be created, but we don't understand what functions will be located in them, or how they'll operate between state offices. So, we have

a director over our service center approach. There will be our National Service Center leadership out of Fort Collins, and there will be some national teams.

Chris: Our national teams, our service center teams, will be essentially things like FERC relicensing, a national winter sports team or resorts team handling those permits, as an example. And then the geographic service centers in Placerville, Missoula, Athens, all the ones, Albuquerque. That's where you'll have teams.

Chris: You'll essentially have, like, an engineering team that provides technical services down to your field, like regional offices do now, but it's focused on production, and that'll be spread in these geographic centers. Essentially, the state directors will be working on the broader programs of work coming from the Forests to deliver those services and making sure that the customer delivery of those is happening in a way that a Forest supervisor needs.

Chris: Going from 9 regions based on state lines to 15 state offices appear very costly and efficient. Why not keep the 9 regional offices and look how to operate them more efficiently?

Chris: Here's the answer I'm going to give you that's straight and direct. We're going to go from a regional system that was well over 3,500 employees down to a state system of about 150 employees. We presented alternatives to our leadership, including the department. When we presented any of our regional models that went down in the way that you're talking about, what they all went to. And they may be right to say, if we keep that model, what's to keep this in ten years of not having 3000 employees at this level? And they came back to us and said, show us an option that changes it completely, so you don't repeat the mistakes of where we've been. That's why.

Chris: How will this plan affect rural economies that depend on Forest Service jobs and recreation?

Chris: I don't know. I don't think it's gonna change, and I don't mean to be flip. Like, we're not changing at a forest or district level. We're trying to take more resources and drive them to the forest and district level. I think that's what really affects rural economies. It is tied to our staffing at a local level and the budgets we get from Congress. I don't think it's going to change much from this reorganization.

Chris: Question #26, the Forest Service reorganization is proceeding without congressional approval, required by 716 of the Agricultural Appropriations Act and Section 421 of the Interior Appropriations Act.

Chris: Hey, just to be really clear, I'm recognizing this fight, I'm hearing it from others, the appropriation, the interior appropriations. The Bill basically redefined reprogramming as including reorganizations. We're being directed from our general counsel's office, from the secretary, that essentially says we're following that, and by the way, Congress doesn't have the authority to approve reorganizations. They cite the Supreme Court cases, and that there's just a broader legal battle there. I'm just stuck in the middle of it. I'm doing my best to lead this on behalf of our employees. I can't take on that battle. I'm as you would. I'm taking the advice from my general counsel who says that we're operating within the law. Bottom line.

Bill Avey: Hey, Chris, it looks like #25 got skipped there.

Chris: Have tribal governments and local stakeholders been formally consulted? Yes, we did tribal consultation. We continue to do tribal consultation. I'm not gonna say I think it was nearly enough, but it was done, and we considered all those responses that we have. Are they available for review? Actually, I don't know. Usually, tribal consultation and what comes out of that is not public. I know that the broader comments, that department has listed those and they are available for review.

Chris: What criteria are being used in the determination of which research facilities will be retained? I think I just talked about that. We're really looking at it from a facilities basis. Our first priority is to keep our researchers and support staff within the commuting area. We're really trying to create a more sustainable facilities base.

Chris: What plans are in place for preserving the data and long-term studies underway at research facilities being closed? Again, we don't have any intention of changing science, but we do recognize the need to preserve records and data, and frankly we're probably doing a bad job of this right now before reorganization. I have now been to multiple facilities that are not staffed, are in poor condition, where I can't even say that those materials are being treated very well right now. Honestly, I don't think we're doing a good job of it now, whether it's regional offices or a lot of our research facilities, what I'm clearly seeing is lots of filing cabinets, old equipment, old data that no one's looked at in years. I pulled together a team that is essentially like I talked about before, putting together standards of how we retain things. I actually think the criticism is probably more focused on the here and now and is good criticism, it's probably less about reorg, but it's a good reminder to make sure we don't lose things.

Chris: Question #29, what does the closure of R&D facilities mean for the employees located there? Again, our intent, as best we can, is not to move them. I think the reason you hear me saying our intent is that if you're in management and R&D in, let's say, the Northern

Research Station or the Southern Research Station, and you want to continue in a position like that, you may have to be relocated differently for certain jobs in Fort Collins. But if you're in a lab or a facility like that, we are doing our best to make sure that we're just looking at this through a facilities lens, not a science or people lens. We are trying to be really clear that this is about buildings, not about people and science.

Chris: And finally, what is the future of state and private forestry? What role would forests continue to have on our forests outside the national forests? We don't intend to make any changes with our state and private, forestry program. We have integrated it very thoughtfully into the broader operations, and we're really looking to see the management of the National Forest System, state and private forestry, and research all being done in an integrated way, and that through our state directors, we're delivering those those resources in an integrated way. So, if we're providing grants in forest health, or working directly with a state forester, through our state and private program through our state director, are also considering the adjacency, the needs, and the broader work on forests, national forests. All right, that's all 30 questions.

Bill Avey: All right, Chris, you have a few more minutes to see if anybody wants to ask any questions before you go.

Kathryn and Tim: Yeah. Hey Chris, me again. So remote telework is, as you know, all too well that eliminating those options has created problems for our facilities. So hopefully that's being considered or is that something on the table to help reduce our facility costs and our leases?

Chris: It's not. I mean, I just again, I try to give straight answers. The department is not giving us that ability to move people into remote status. I can put them into any Forest Service office, but I can't have them necessarily working from home. We will grant telework when we are either doing construction on the facility, or the facility isn't ready yet for us, like, our Athens facility is not ready, we're gonna need to put funding into it to bring it up to speed. We will put people in telework in those spaces when we can.

Dennis Krusac: I'm just looking, we've done away with the regional offices and these boundaries, and I'm looking at some of the state boundaries, and I'm just curious whether there's any ecological thought going into this, because we've got West Virginia, you've got the Monongahela, but you also have the George Washington and Jefferson that also have lands in West Virginia, and to me, it would make more sense to throw West Virginia into this, the southeast out of that Athens field office, and the same thing when you start looking at the Shawnee and the Mark Twain. Right now, they're lumped in with the Lake

States, and it may make more sense to throw them in with the Ozark, St. Francis, and Ouachita, just from managing similar issues.

Chris: Yeah, you're right, and so I'm going to be in speed mode here, but you're right, Dennis, and we pulled together a team back last fall that made these recommendations, and I'd say they shifted a couple times. They started from a place of looking at those ecological zones, like the Appalachians, and how do you connect those for the very reason you're talking about. And then you had to look at span of control, to make sure that a state director... you didn't want to have one supervising two forests and one supervising 14.

Chris: And so, where things didn't necessarily always meet the broader ecological intent was when you had to manage span of control equally and create complexity equally. And there are a few of those situations that we know of and are aware, and you're right. We're gonna have to manage that collectively. Maybe I'll put it that way.

Bill Hahnenberg: Wildland Fire, the chief for fire and safety. Curious about that person's role with the newly created US Wildland Fire Service and how that might evolve. That's the first part of my question. The second part is, what's the role of the agency administrators now in large wildland fire management?

Chris: We've created no change for agency administrators across this agency. Our current stance and our wildland fire organization is that wildland fire response and land management are essential to be integrated. We are making no changes in that. And I will just tell you from my standpoint, I will continue to advocate for that space. I am not agreeing with what I see at a DOI, but I would also say my undersecretary doesn't agree with me. But we are making no changes there. The second thing is, is that we need to have some equivalency of our national director because we are the largest wildland fire resource, I mean, agency, and we provide the majority of aviation resources across this agency.

Chris: Part of the reason you see this position broken out in the way it is, is that we have some equivalency of that position over to DOI. Because we need to maintain that. I think you know what I mean.

Bill Hahnenberg: I believe those steps make a lot of sense. Thanks for the answer, Chris.

Bill Avey: Chris, thank you very much for this time. We really appreciate everybody being on the call, appreciate all the questions, and Chris we appreciate both you taking the time, but you hanging in there a little extra to help the agency get through this turbulent time. And with that, I'm gonna go ahead and end the call. Thank you all very much.

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