

Forest Service Restructuring: Member Questions/FS Response

A SUMMARY

June 2026

Editorial and Preparation Note

This document was prepared by the National Association of Forest Service Retirees (NAFSR) Communications Committee and reviewed by members of the NAFSR Board of Directors. The purpose is to provide NAFSR members and other interested readers with an organized summary of questions posed to Associate Chief Chris French regarding the proposed Forest Service reorganization and the responses he provided during a May 20, 2026 discussion with NAFSR members.

This Summary was developed from a transcript of that discussion. The original questions from NAFSR members have been preserved to the greatest extent possible. Responses have been summarized and edited for clarity, organization, and readability while seeking to preserve the substance, context, and rationale of the answers provided.

This document was prepared with the assistance of artificial intelligence (AI) tools. All content has been reviewed and edited by members of the NAFSR Communications Committee. Every effort has been made to accurately reflect the discussion that occurred. Where uncertainty existed regarding interpretation of a response, the Communications Committee relied on the transcript and sought to preserve the original meaning and intent of the speaker rather than provide additional interpretation.

In preparing this document, the Communications Committee sought to preserve not only the conclusions reflected in Associate Chief French's answers, but also the context and rationale he provided. In many cases, understanding why a response was given is as important as understanding the response itself.

The Summary is intended to serve as a factual and contextual record of the discussion. It is not intended to advocate for or against the proposed reorganization, nor should inclusion of a question or answer be interpreted as endorsement of any particular viewpoint by NAFSR. The Letter to the Chief with 30 Questions and complete transcript of the conversation with Associate Chief French can be found on the [NAFSR website](#).

Why This Summary Matters

NAFSR members hold a range of views regarding the proposed Forest Service reorganization. Some members support many aspects of the proposal, some have significant concerns, and many hold views somewhere in between. That diversity of opinion is both expected and healthy within an organization comprised of retired Forest Service professionals from many backgrounds, disciplines, and leadership positions.

At the same time, NAFSR has long sought to maintain a constructive, nonpartisan relationship with Forest Service leadership and to support the Agency and its mission wherever possible. Asking thoughtful questions and seeking clear answers are important ways that NAFSR fulfills that role.

The May 20, 2026 discussion between Associate Chief Chris French and NAFSR members reflected that tradition. Members raised substantive questions regarding the proposed reorganization, and Associate Chief French devoted significant time to providing candid and thoughtful responses. The Communications Committee believes NAFSR has a responsibility to ensure that information shared during that discussion is preserved, organized, and made accessible to members in a manner that is fair to both the questioners and the respondent.

This Summary is therefore intended to serve as a factual and contextual record of that discussion. Its purpose is not to persuade readers to support or oppose the reorganization. Rather, it is intended to help members understand the questions that were raised, the responses that were provided, and the reasoning and context associated with those responses.

Questions and Response Summary

Q1. What are the key justifications to trigger this reorganization?

Answer:

French stated that the reorganization was initiated in response to direction from USDA leadership to reduce management layers within the Department and to relocate Forest Service headquarters functions to the West. He explained that the Secretary's stated intent was to place agency leadership closer to the lands and stakeholders served by the Forest Service.

French also emphasized that many elements of the reorganization address longstanding organizational challenges that predate the current administration. He cited a significant

decline in the agency's non-fire workforce over the past 15 to 20 years, increasing staffing shortages at the field level, and what he described as a growing imbalance between field capacity and administrative overhead. He noted that many ranger districts currently operate with very small staffs and that the agency must work within staffing levels supported by congressional appropriations.

According to French, the reorganization is intended to redirect available capacity toward field operations by creating service-delivery organizations that can provide specialized support to forests and districts while allowing more positions to be focused on mission delivery at the local level.

Q2. What metrics will you use to determine if this plan succeeds or fails?

Answer:

French identified three primary areas that will be used to evaluate the effectiveness of the reorganization.

The first is a reduction in facility and lease costs. He stated that the agency currently maintains a large inventory of facilities in poor condition and faces increasing lease expenses that are not sustainable within existing budgets. A key objective of the reorganization is to create a more sustainable facilities footprint. Currently, facility costs far exceed the Agency's allotted budget.

The second is an increase in the amount of program funding reaching field units. French indicated that the agency is establishing targets to increase the proportion of available funding that supports on-the-ground work rather than administrative overhead.

The third is an increase in staffing capacity directly supporting forests and districts. He stated that the agency will evaluate whether personnel and work are being shifted toward field operations and whether those changes result in greater mission delivery at the local level.

Q3. What is the expected cost, the projected savings and when will they accrue?

Answer:

French stated that the agency is still estimating the full cost of the reorganization. He identified employee relocations as one of the largest potential expenses, noting that relocation costs vary considerably depending on individual circumstances. He indicated that the agency is attempting to minimize relocation costs by identifying office space

within local commuting areas and reducing the number of employees who may need to move.

Regarding savings, French said the agency expects reductions in lease and facility costs to provide some of the earliest measurable benefits. He cited the Yates Building in Washington, D.C., as an example of a facility where reduced space utilization is expected to lower annual costs significantly.

French also stated that the agency is developing methods to measure reductions in indirect administrative costs and management overhead. He indicated that a key objective is to determine whether those savings can be redirected toward field operations and mission delivery.

Q4. Since funding for this reorganization is not included in the President's Budget, what is the plan for paying for this reorganization?

Answer:

French stated that the agency is implementing the reorganization based on funding levels provided through congressional appropriations rather than the President's Budget request.

French indicated that the agency is working with legal counsel to ensure compliance with applicable congressional notification and reprogramming requirements associated with the reorganization. He also stated that the agency has access to certain prior-year funds that may be used to support transition and employee-related costs associated with the reorganization.

He noted that the President's Budget request is a proposal and does not determine final agency funding levels. According to French, recent presidential budget proposals have included significant reductions to several Forest Service programs that were not adopted in the congressional appropriations under which the agency currently operates.

Q5. Do you believe the Forest Service will be more or less capable of fulfilling its mission with fewer people after these changes? It seems like you are expecting to do more with less.

Answer:

French stated that he believes the Forest Service is currently underfunded and understaffed relative to the full scope of its mission and that this challenge exists regardless of the proposed reorganization.

He explained that, given current funding levels, the agency's objective is to place a greater proportion of its workforce in positions that directly support field operations rather than administrative functions. In his view, the reorganization represents the best opportunity available within existing budget constraints to maximize mission delivery.

French stated that he does not currently expect the agency to operate with fewer total employees than it has today, although he acknowledged that some employees may choose to retire, resign, or otherwise leave the agency as a result of the reorganization. He indicated that the agency is now below its congressionally funded staffing ceiling and expects to begin hiring additional employees, particularly at the forest and district level, to rebuild field capacity as positions become available.

Q6. How will the reorganization make implementation of requirements like NEPA and ESA more efficient?

Answer:

French stated that recent policy changes have already contributed to improving the efficiency of NEPA and ESA implementation, regardless of the reorganization. He acknowledged that opinions may differ regarding those policy changes but noted that they are already affecting agency operations.

With respect to the reorganization itself, French explained that the agency intends to redirect personnel currently performing program management functions into more specialized service-delivery roles. He stated that this would allow the Forest Service to bring additional capacity to activities such as NEPA analysis, ESA consultation, and project authorization work.

According to French, the service center approach is intended to create specialized teams that can be deployed to support forests and districts with project planning and consultation requirements. He stated that moving personnel into these functions should improve the agency's ability to provide timely support and complete project work more effectively and efficiently.

Q7. 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?

Answer:

French stated that the Chief's office in Washington, D.C., will be retained and that the Chief's desk and other significant artifacts located in the Yates Building are not expected to be moved. He explained that the agency has been conducting an inventory of artifacts and plans to consolidate them within the building to ensure their continued preservation.

Regarding regional offices, French stated that the agency is establishing a team specifically focused on artifact retention, records management, and the preservation of historical materials during facility transitions. He explained that the purpose of the effort is to ensure that artifacts, records, and other historically significant materials are properly identified, retained, and transferred when offices are consolidated or relocated.

French also noted that the agency has been consulting with organizations such as the Forest History Society and museum professionals regarding preservation options. He stated that protocols and standards for handling these materials were being developed at the time of the discussion and that he did not anticipate the loss of significant artifacts or records as a result of the reorganization.

Q8. As part of the reorganization, is it expected that funding will be shifted to state or private entities?

Answer:

French stated that he was not aware of any plans to shift funding to state or private entities as part of the reorganization.

He explained that the Forest Service intends to continue working through existing Shared Stewardship agreements, partnerships, grants, and other collaborative arrangements that are already part of normal agency operations. According to French, those activities are separate from the reorganization itself and are not being driven by the proposed organizational changes.

Q9. How many people or positions will this reorganization move or eliminate?

Answer:

French stated that approximately 500 employees had initially been notified that they might be subject to relocation. He explained that the agency had been actively working to reduce that number by identifying office space within local commuting areas and exploring other options that would allow employees to remain in place. He indicated that the final number of relocations would likely be lower than the original estimate.

French drew an important distinction between employees and positions. He stated that no employees were being reduced in force (RIF'd), no employees would lose grade levels as a result of the reorganization, and affected employees would be offered positions that maintain their grade and occupational series.

According to French, some existing positions will be eliminated as the organization changes. However, he explained that the employees occupying those positions would be offered different positions within the new organizational structure. As an example, he noted that Regional Forester positions would no longer exist in their current form, but the individuals serving in those positions would move into other leadership roles within the new organization.

French emphasized that while certain positions are being discontinued or restructured, the agency's intent is to retain employees and place them into positions within the new organizational framework rather than eliminate personnel.

Q10. 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?

Answer:

French explained that approximately 6,500 employees received letters because they were identified as being subject to the reorganization. He emphasized that being subject to the

reorganization does not necessarily mean an employee will be relocated or that the employee's job duties will change.

According to French, many employees received notifications because their reporting relationships, organizational alignment, or supervisory structure may change under the new organization. He stated that these employees may continue performing the same work in the same locations while reporting through a different organizational structure.

French further explained that employees located in regional offices other than Portland, Milwaukee, and Atlanta generally are not being asked to relocate. Instead, many will remain in their current duty stations while becoming part of broader service-delivery teams or national organizations supporting forests and districts.

Regarding the estimate of approximately 500 relocations, French stated that the largest number of potential relocations involves employees located in the National Capital Region, with smaller numbers associated with the Portland and Milwaukee offices. He also noted that negotiations with bargaining-unit employees and ongoing efforts to identify alternative office space could reduce the number of relocations further.

French stated that the difference between the approximately 6,500 notification letters and the approximately 500 potential relocations reflects the distinction between organizational change and physical relocation. Most employees who received letters were notified because they were affected by changes in organizational structure rather than because they were expected to move to a new duty station.

Q11. How many experienced personnel, firefighters, ecologists, land managers are expected to leave or already departed under this plan?

Answer:

French stated that, at the time of the discussion, the agency had not seen a significant increase in attrition attributable to the reorganization. He noted that the Forest Service experienced employee departures earlier in the year but indicated that attrition rates since the reorganization announcement remained generally consistent with historical patterns.

French acknowledged concerns regarding comparisons to the Bureau of Land Management's headquarters relocation and the employee losses associated with that effort. He stated that he could not predict how many employees ultimately may choose to retire, resign, or leave the agency because of the reorganization, but he did not believe the Forest Service would experience losses on the scale reported during the BLM relocation.

According to French, one reason for that expectation is that the agency intentionally designed a different approach. He explained that he sought input from individuals who experienced both the BLM headquarters move and the establishment of the Albuquerque Service Center to understand what worked, what did not, and how employee retention could be improved.

French stated that, unlike previous reorganizations that required employees to quickly accept relocation or leave the agency, the Forest Service is attempting to provide affected employees with advance notice, multiple voluntary reassignment opportunities, relocation assistance, and a range of potential duty locations. He explained that these measures are intended to maximize employee choice and retain as many experienced employees as possible while implementing the reorganization.

Q12. We've heard that you had people sign non-disclosure and loyalty agreements. Is this true? How does this demonstrate transparency?

Answer:

French stated that the Forest Service did not require employees to sign loyalty agreements and indicated that he was not aware of any such agreements being used.

He acknowledged that a limited number of employees were asked to sign non-disclosure agreements immediately prior to the public announcement of the reorganization. According to French, the purpose of those agreements was to prevent information regarding potential impacts to employees and offices from being released before agency leadership had an opportunity to communicate directly with affected employees.

French explained that the agency considered it important for employees to hear about potential changes from the Chief and agency leadership rather than through media reports, social media, congressional offices, or other unofficial sources. He stated that the non-disclosure agreements were used only during the short period leading up to the announcement and were discontinued after employees had been notified.

French acknowledged that some individuals may disagree with that decision but stated that the intent was to ensure that employees received information directly from agency leadership before details became public.

Q13. 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?

Answer:

French stated that the proposed state offices generally would consist of approximately five to ten employees supporting a State Director, although staffing levels may vary depending on the size and complexity of individual states. He noted that California would likely have a somewhat larger organization because of its scale and workload.

French explained that State Director positions are being established as career-reserved Senior Executive Service positions and are intended to serve a role comparable to the current Regional Forester positions. He stated that some individuals have already expressed interest in serving in those positions voluntarily.

Regarding relocation, French stated that employees assigned to State Director positions, whether through voluntary reassignment or agency assignment, would retain their grade levels and would be eligible for transfer-of-station benefits where relocation is required. He indicated that the agency intends to pay relocation expenses associated with those assignments.

Q14. 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?

Answer:

French explained that the proposed service centers are intended to provide specialized support services directly to forests and districts. He cited examples such as NEPA support, engineering, facilities management, grants and agreements, contracting, and other technical services that currently exist in regional offices and Washington Office organizations.

According to French, State Directors will be responsible for ensuring that forests receive the level of service they need from these support organizations. He described the State Director role as one focused on customer service, accountability, and coordination among forests, service centers, and national leadership.

French stated that service centers will provide technical expertise and specialized services, while State Directors will oversee service delivery and ensure that support is aligned with the needs and priorities of forests within their states. He explained that the agency intends to establish defined service-delivery expectations and accountability mechanisms to ensure that support functions are responsive to field needs.

French indicated that this approach differs from prior centralization efforts because the intent is not simply to consolidate administrative functions, but to organize specialized teams around the direct delivery of services and project support to forests and districts.

Q15. 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?

Answer:

French stated that he had reviewed nearly 40 analyses, studies, and organizational reviews completed between the late 1990s and 2024 that informed various aspects of the proposed reorganization. He indicated that these analyses addressed subjects such as organizational structure, facilities management, regional office configurations, staffing levels, budget constraints, and research and development organization.

French stated that many of these analyses would be made publicly available following review and that some are already available through public sources. He noted that the agency was preparing to provide the collection of analyses to the Government Accountability Office and was working through review processes before broader release.

French distinguished between organizational analyses and the specific resource outcome analyses referenced in the question. He stated that he had not seen analyses that directly evaluated whether the reorganization would affect national forest resources, watershed conditions, threatened and endangered species, recreation opportunities, or acres burned. Rather, he explained that the analyses focused primarily on organizational effectiveness, staffing, facilities, and the agency's ability to operate within available budgets.

French stated that many of the issues addressed through the reorganization—including facility conditions, staffing imbalances, organizational complexity, and declining field capacity—have been discussed within the agency for many years. He explained that the

current effort provided an opportunity to address some of those long-standing concerns using information developed through multiple organizational studies and reviews conducted over several decades.

Q16. What alternatives were considered to this plan?

Answer:

French stated that the agency evaluated multiple alternatives while developing the proposed reorganization. For the relocation of headquarters functions to the West, he said the agency evaluated several potential locations, including Phoenix, Albuquerque, Denver, Salt Lake City, Boise, and Missoula.

According to French, the agency compared these locations using factors such as cost of living, housing costs, available office space, transportation access, airport connectivity, and overall quality-of-life considerations. He stated that Salt Lake City ranked highest across the factors evaluated and also offered existing Forest Service office space that had recently been improved but was significantly underutilized.

French also stated that the agency evaluated a variety of organizational structures. These included maintaining nine regional offices with reduced staffing levels ("skinny regions"), consolidating regions into larger geographic units, and eliminating regional offices entirely. Similar alternatives were evaluated for Research and Development. According to French, the final proposal reflected the agency's assessment of these alternatives together with direction received from USDA leadership.

Q17. 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?

Answer:

French stated that relocating the Chief to Salt Lake City is intended to place agency leadership physically closer to the majority of National Forest System lands, which are located in the western United States. He noted that the relocation was part of the direction provided to the agency and that the location of Salt Lake City places leadership closer to much of the acreage managed by the Forest Service.

With respect to Research and Development, French acknowledged that the agency's messaging regarding research facilities had created confusion and concern. He explained that many employees received reorganization notices because their facilities were being evaluated, which some interpreted as meaning that research locations would be closed or scientists relocated.

French stated that the agency's primary focus is evaluating facilities rather than relocating scientists or discontinuing research programs. He explained that approximately half of the agency's research workforce is already concentrated in about 20 major facilities, while the remaining employees are distributed across a much larger number of sites. According to French, the agency is evaluating whether its research facilities footprint is financially sustainable, particularly where facilities have significant deferred maintenance costs, low occupancy, or overlapping functions.

French stated that the agency does not intend to move researchers away from their local areas or close experimental forests as part of this effort. Rather, he described the objective as creating a more sustainable facilities portfolio while retaining scientific expertise, ongoing studies, and long-term data collection. He acknowledged that the agency's communication regarding this effort could have been clearer and accepted responsibility for some of the confusion that resulted.

Q18. Will the new state directors be SES employees or political appointees?

Answer:

French stated that the State Director positions are intended to be career-reserved Senior Executive Service positions rather than political appointments.

He explained that the positions are being established using the same general personnel authorities and professional leadership framework currently used for Regional Foresters and many other senior career leaders within the Forest Service. According to French, the positions are intended to be filled by career employees and are not designed as political appointments.

Q19. 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.

Answer:

French stated that he did not agree with the premise that the proposed structure would diminish customer service or weaken relationships with states.

According to French, the purpose of the State Director structure is to strengthen and focus relationships with state governments, state foresters, and other partners by creating more direct points of contact and accountability. He explained that in the western United States the proposed structure would create dedicated state-level relationships in locations where much of the National Forest System acreage is located.

French also noted that in the eastern United States the proposal would increase the number of senior organizational units focused on those states. He stated that the agency would move from two regional offices serving those states to four State Director offices, which he believes will provide more focused attention and stronger relationships with state partners.

French indicated that the agency views the State Director concept as an opportunity to improve coordination and responsiveness rather than reduce engagement with state governments and stakeholders.

Q20. 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?

Answer:

French stated that communications would remain an important function at multiple levels of the organization and would not be centralized exclusively in either Salt Lake City or Washington, D.C.

According to French, State Director offices are expected to include communications, external affairs, and tribal relations expertise as core functions. He explained that these

positions are considered essential because of the importance of maintaining relationships with states, tribes, partners, stakeholders, and local communities.

French also stated that communications personnel will continue to be located in Washington, D.C., where they can work directly with USDA leadership and national-level audiences. Those personnel will be aligned organizationally with communications staff supporting headquarters functions in Salt Lake City.

More broadly, French stated that the agency's vision is to empower communication throughout the organization rather than concentrating all communication authority at the national level. He emphasized the importance of enabling public affairs officers and local leaders to communicate effectively about work occurring on forests and districts while maintaining coordination across the broader agency communications program.

Q21. How will forests and districts request and receive support from the new service centers? Will there be priorities established if demand exceeds capacity?

Answer:

French stated that the agency is developing service-delivery models and accountability mechanisms to ensure that forests and districts can obtain the support they need from the new service centers. He explained that the intent is to organize specialized expertise in a manner that allows resources to be shared more effectively across multiple forests and states.

According to French, service centers will function as providers of specialized services rather than as independent organizations setting priorities for field units. He stated that forests and districts will continue to identify and communicate their needs, while State Directors will play a key role in ensuring that support is aligned with field priorities and delivered in a timely manner.

French acknowledged that prioritization will still be necessary when demand exceeds available capacity. However, he indicated that the purpose of the new structure is to increase the amount of specialized support available to forests and districts rather than create additional barriers to obtaining assistance.

French stated that accountability for service delivery will be an important part of the new model and that the agency intends to establish expectations and performance measures to help ensure that support organizations remain responsive to field needs.

Q22. Will forests and districts have less authority under this structure? Are we moving decision-making farther away from local units?

Answer:

French stated that the intent of the reorganization is not to move decision-making farther from forests and districts, but rather to increase the amount of support available to local units so they can focus more directly on mission delivery.

He explained that many forests currently struggle to obtain specialized expertise because staffing levels have declined and technical positions are difficult to maintain at every location. According to French, the service center concept is intended to provide access to specialized expertise while allowing forests and districts to remain focused on local priorities and implementation.

French stated that line officers will continue to exercise authorities associated with their positions. He emphasized that the agency's objective is to move capacity closer to field operations rather than concentrate decision-making authority at higher organizational levels.

According to French, one of the underlying goals of the reorganization is to strengthen forests and districts by reducing administrative burdens and increasing access to technical support resources.

Q23. How will this reorganization affect relationships with local communities, counties, partners, and stakeholders?

Answer:

French stated that maintaining strong relationships with communities, counties, partners, and stakeholders is a critical objective of the proposed organization.

He explained that the State Director structure is intended, in part, to strengthen external relationships by providing senior-level leadership focused on state governments, partner organizations, and stakeholder engagement. According to French, State Directors will be expected to work closely with governors, state foresters, county officials, tribes, and other partners while helping coordinate support across the organization.

French also emphasized that forests and districts will continue to serve as the primary point of contact for local communities and local issues. He stated that the reorganization is not intended to reduce local engagement or diminish the role of field units in maintaining relationships with communities and stakeholders.

Rather, French described the proposed structure as an effort to improve coordination between local units and broader organizational resources while preserving the importance of local relationships and community engagement.

Q24. What impacts might this reorganization have on rural economies and communities that depend on Forest Service employees and facilities?

Answer:

French acknowledged that organizational changes can affect communities where Forest Service offices and facilities are located. He stated that the agency recognizes the importance of Forest Service employees and facilities to many local economies and communities.

French also stated that he does not expect the reorganization to significantly affect rural economies because the proposed changes are focused primarily on headquarters, regional office, and support functions rather than forests and ranger districts. He explained that the agency is not making substantial changes at the forest or district level and is instead attempting to move additional resources and support to those field units.

According to French, the factors that most directly affect rural economies are local Forest Service staffing levels, field operations, and the budgets provided by Congress. He stated that the objective of the reorganization is to increase support available to forests and districts rather than reduce the agency's presence in local communities.

French noted that the agency has attempted, where possible, to minimize relocations and retain employees within their local commuting areas. He stated that many employees affected by the reorganization are expected to remain in their current locations even if their reporting relationships or organizational alignment change.

French concluded that he did not expect the reorganization itself to significantly change the agency's contribution to rural communities and local economies.

Q25. How were tribes consulted regarding this reorganization? What opportunities will tribes have to provide input?

Answer:

French stated that tribal consultation is an important responsibility of the Forest Service and that the agency has been actively engaging with tribes regarding the proposed reorganization.

He explained that consultation efforts have included direct outreach, meetings with tribal leaders, and discussions intended to explain the proposed changes and gather input regarding potential concerns and impacts. According to French, tribal engagement is continuing as the reorganization develops and implementation details are refined.

French emphasized that tribal relationships are not dependent solely on organizational structure and stated that the agency intends to maintain its trust responsibilities and government-to-government relationships regardless of how the organization is configured.

French also noted that tribal relations expertise is expected to remain an important function within the organization, including within State Director offices. He indicated that maintaining strong tribal relationships and ensuring effective consultation remain priorities for agency leadership as implementation moves forward.

Q26. The Forest Service reorganization is proceeding without Congressional approval required by Section 716 of the Agriculture Appropriations Act and Section 421 of the Interior Appropriations Act. How is the agency proceeding without that approval?

Answer:

French acknowledged that this issue has generated significant discussion and disagreement. He stated that the agency has received guidance from the Office of General Counsel and USDA leadership regarding the legal authorities associated with the reorganization.

According to French, the appropriations language at issue has been interpreted by some as applying to agency reorganizations. He stated that the guidance he has received from agency counsel and USDA leadership is that the Forest Service is proceeding in a manner that is consistent with applicable legal requirements.

French also noted that broader legal questions regarding Congressional authority over agency reorganizations are the subject of ongoing debate. He stated that those issues are being addressed by agency leadership, USDA, and legal counsel rather than by the employees responsible for implementing the reorganization.

French emphasized that his role is to lead the implementation effort based on the legal guidance provided to him. He stated that he is relying on the advice of agency counsel and USDA leadership, who have advised that the agency is operating within the law.

Q27. What criteria are being used in determining which Research and Development facilities will be retained?

Answer:

French stated that the primary focus of the evaluation is the sustainability and condition of agency facilities rather than the relocation of scientists or the elimination of research programs.

He explained that approximately half of the agency's Research and Development workforce is already concentrated in about 20 major facilities that are not currently being evaluated for consolidation. The facilities under evaluation generally represent a much larger number of locations with smaller staffing levels.

According to French, the agency's objective is to determine whether its current facilities footprint is sustainable given deferred maintenance costs, operating expenses, facility utilization, and long-term budget realities. He cited examples of locations with numerous buildings and relatively few employees, as well as situations where multiple Forest Service facilities exist within the same locality and may be underutilized.

French stated that the agency does not intend to move researchers out of their local commuting areas and does not intend to close experimental forests. Rather, he described the effort as an evaluation of facilities designed to create a more sustainable facilities portfolio while retaining scientific expertise and ongoing research programs.

Q28. What plans are in place for preserving data and long-term studies underway at research facilities that may be closed or consolidated?

Answer:

French stated that preserving records, scientific data, and long-term studies is an important concern and acknowledged that these challenges are not unique to the proposed reorganization.

He explained that during visits to research facilities, regional offices, and other locations he observed records, equipment, and data collections that were not always being managed or preserved as effectively as they should be. He indicated that some facilities are poorly staffed or in poor condition, creating risks to the preservation of important records and information.

According to French, the agency has established a team to review and improve implementation of existing records retention, artifact preservation, and data management requirements and processes. He stated that this work is intended to help ensure that important information, scientific records, and long-term datasets are retained and protected as organizational changes occur, consistent with established agency records retention policies and guidance.

French further stated that concerns regarding records and data preservation are not solely a reorganization issue. He noted that these challenges exist today in some agency facilities and viewed the question as a useful reminder of the importance of improving records and data stewardship across the organization while organizational changes are being implemented.

French stated that the agency has no intention of changing scientific programs as part of these efforts and intends to preserve important scientific information and long-term studies.

Q29. What does the closure or consolidation of Research and Development facilities mean for employees located there?

Answer:

French stated that the agency's intent is, whenever possible, not to relocate researchers and support staff as facilities are evaluated or consolidated.

He explained that some management positions within the Research and Development organization could potentially require relocation depending on future organizational decisions. However, he distinguished those situations from researchers and laboratory staff working at specific facilities.

According to French, the agency is evaluating facilities through a facilities-management lens rather than a science or workforce lens. He emphasized that the objective is to make sound decisions regarding buildings, deferred maintenance obligations, and facility utilization while retaining scientific expertise, ongoing research, and employees wherever possible.

French stated that the agency has been attempting to clearly communicate that the evaluation is primarily about facilities rather than people or science programs and that retaining scientific capacity remains an important objective.

Q30. What is the future of State, Private and Tribal Forestry under this reorganization? What role will the Forest Service continue to have in forests outside the National Forest System?

Answer:

French stated that the agency does not intend to make significant changes to its State, Private and Tribal Forestry programs as part of the reorganization.

He indicated that the Forest Service intends to continue carrying out its existing responsibilities and authorities related to state, private, and tribal forestry activities. According to French, the reorganization is not intended to alter the agency's role in supporting forestry activities beyond National Forest System lands.

French did not identify any major programmatic changes affecting the agency's responsibilities related to forests outside the National Forest System and indicated that those functions would continue under the proposed organizational structure.