

Press Release

For Immediate Release: Thursday, August 3, 2006

Contact: Mark Davis, NFFE Forest Service Council, (608) 231-9474; Carol Goldberg, PEER, (202) 265-7337; Casey Judd, Federal Wildland Fire Service Association, (208) 775-4577

FOREST SERVICE LOOKS TO OUTSOURCE ITS “FIRE MILITIA” Fire-Fighting Capability May be Compromised by Contracting Out Staff Positions

Washington, DC — Even as the nation’s fire suppression resources are stretched to their limit by another harrowing fire season, the Forest Service is proceeding with outsourcing plans affecting thousands of its staff who are trained fire-fighters. These actions are part of an overall plan to study replacement of as many as 21,350 Forest Service jobs, more than two-thirds of the total agency workforce, with contractors, according to documents jointly released today by the National Federation of Federal Employees (NFFE) Forest Service Council, the Federal Wildland Fire Service Association (FWFSA) and Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility (PEER).

Spurred by concerns that agency plans would reduce national fire suppression capabilities, appropriations committees in both houses of Congress have passed language prohibiting outsourcing studies involving personnel who support wildfire suppression activities. Nonetheless, the Forest Service recently briefed the President’s White House Office of Management and Budget that it will proceed with outsourcing studies affecting agency fire-fighters regardless of whether this language is passed into law.

Outsourcing studies determine which employee groupings or functions will be put out for bid among private contractors. Forest Service plans would not spare employees who are part of the agency’s “fire militia” from potential job loss. For example, as many as 2,000 Forest Service fire militia members are included in the agency’s planned outsourcing feasibility study of staff performing data collection and analysis required by the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA).

Fire militia members work in a variety of “day jobs,” but are certified for critical fire suppression duties, many of which require years of training and experience on fires to acquire. Fire militia members are regularly dispatched to fight fires throughout the country.

“We just went to the highest wildfire risk level, National Preparedness Level 5, with several regions experiencing major incidents which have the potential to exhaust all agency fire resources” stated Casey Judd, Business Manager of the FWFSA. “The Forest Service simply cannot afford to give away fire-fighting capacity, regardless of the reason.”

“There is broad bi-partisan agreement that the Forest Service competitive sourcing program is an unmitigated disaster,” observed Bill Dougan, President of the NFFE Forest Service Council, noting that a Government Accountability Office (GAO) review is slated to begin following a bi-partisan expression of concern. “It makes sense to put this program on hold until the GAO audit can be completed.”

In addition to fire-fighting, fire militia employees respond to a wide range of emergencies, ranging from hurricanes to outbreaks of avian viruses, such as Exotic Newcastle Disease. The Incident Command System used by the fire militia has been so successful that President Bush ordered the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to duplicate the structure.

“These outsourcing plans threaten to FEMA-ize the Forest Service by atomizing its operations into disposable portions and sacrificing its large-scale incident management capabilities,” added PEER Executive Director Jeff Ruch, pointing to the irony of the Bush administration using the current Forest Service Incident Command System as a model for reforming FEMA. “Unfortunately, delays in enacting appropriations legislation may allow the Forest Service to begin the contracting process before Congress can put a stop to it.”

###

Read the NFFE Forest Service Council fact sheet

http://www.nffe-fsc.org/Documents/CSIndex/Brief_060717/FS_CompSourcing_7_20_2006.doc.

Look at the Forest Service briefing of OMB

http://www.nffe-fsc.org/Documents/CSIndex/Brief_060717/OMB_Briefing_060628.htm.

View the bi-partisan letter calling for a GAO audit of Forest Service outsourcing studies

http://www.nffe-fsc.org/Documents/PressReleases/Senate_060214_GAOAuditRequest.pdf.

Revisit the Forest Service plan to study more than 20,000 jobs for outsourcing

http://www.peer.org/news/news_id.php?row_id=651.

Learn about Incident Command System

http://www.nifc.gov/fireinfo/ics_disc.html.

See the NFFE Forest Service Council backgrounder on competitive sourcing

http://www.nffe-fsc.org/Documents/CSIndex/Competitive_Sourcing_Briefing_2006/Comp_Sourcing_Briefing_May_04_2006.doc.