

NFFE Forest Service Council

Message from the President

Travel Cap Update

October 6, 2011



Local Presidents,

Please forward to employees you represent. This is to update you on your union's work at the national level on the mandate from the Department to cut travel by 20%. A few months ago, I solicited for employee accounts on how the travel cap was adversely affecting their ability to carry out their work. I received a number of troubling accounts about the cap causing decreased efficiency, increased costs, and negatively affected safety (http://www.nffe-fsc.org/110823_Unintended_Consequences_of_Travel_Cap_redacted.pdf). I took this information to the Chief and to the Department.

To be clear, we understand the importance of reducing discretionary travel. The budget is a real concern. However, if we end up in a shell game in which we're spending more on other lines items than we're saving in travel, this doesn't help the budget. There needs to be a way to deal with this situation. One is suggested in my letter to the Department (http://www.nffe-fsc.org/FSC_110811_Travel_Cap_Updated.pdf).

With FY 2011 now behind us, we're focusing on FY 2012. Hopefully, our advocacy will have an effect on how things are handled next field season. We are keeping the pressure on. Recently, I put the Department on notice through the USDA Forum that: "If a travel cap or guidance to reduce travel is under consideration for FY 2012, it is my expectation that Forum members be afforded pre-decisional involvement on the matter pursuant to the Executive Order." (To explain, the President's Executive Order on Labor-Management relations established a labor-management committee at the Department level to address issues at that level. The Executive Order also mandates pre-decisional involvement of the union "in all workplace matters to the fullest extent practicable.")

Locals and Regional/Station union officials have a role to play in this. The issue is not just the cap, but also how travel gets prioritized under the cap. The Chief told me that the sorts of examples I shared were inappropriate and contrary to the guidance he sent out. Specifically, his letter of 5/16/11 indicated, under "Criteria to Guide Travel," that travel to meet assigned targets and safe mission accomplishment should be prioritized (see Chief's letter: http://www.nffe-fsc.org/FS_110516_Cost_Reductions_Letter.pdf). I have no way to know how this has trickled down and affected reality on the ground. Using the information I've shared here today, it is up to Local unions to communicate with local management up to the Forest or Station level on how reality on the ground may not be matching with the Chief's direction. If you don't get a satisfactory response, elevate the issue to your Council Vice President to raise at the Regional/Station level.

As this example demonstrates, we can only be strong and effective if we are strong at all levels of our organization. At the Council level, we can work for better policies at the national level. Whether or not they are actually followed on the ground depends in large measure on the strength of your Local union. One lone voice crying in the wilderness has little effect. A chorus of voices raised in solidarity -- now that gets attention and sometimes even action. If you appreciate our representation, please support your Local union. If you feel like we should change directions or do more, all the more reason to step up and get involved. The union is just us employees, standing together. Nothing more. Nothing less.

/s/ Mark Davis

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"All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is for good [people] to do nothing." - Edmund Burke