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Route To:

Subject: Law Enforcement and Investigations Work Environment Issues

To: Law Enforcement and Investigations Employees

I'm sure many of you have read recent articles in the media that take a negative view of the Law Enforcement and Investigations (LEI) program and Forest Service leadership. This, as well as the results from the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey and direct communication from employees, provided a catalyst for connecting with the workforce to discuss important issues in the work environment. Please be assured that I stand by all of you in the LEI workforce. You consistently show remarkable resilience and outstanding performance of duty as you perform some of the toughest jobs in the Forest Service. You are a critical part of this agency, and your role protecting the people who use our national forests can't be overstated.

I personally wanted to hear from you as we work toward our goal of making this agency a better place to work. I want to thank many of you for joining me in recent conversations about your work, its importance, the concerns you have about challenges you encounter, concerns about the work environment, and concerns about leadership. I asked for your ideas to address concerns and I appreciate that you responded with constructive ideas, candor, and openness.

I opened up these conversations in the spirit of working to address the things that need immediate attention as well as the longer term actions that will be of most help to the employees of LEI and the Forest Service. I also recognize that not all employees participated so we will continue to seek additional input as we move forward. While there were a number of broad themes that emerged, I've asked for a content analysis (to be conducted by independent specialists) to make sure we have all the concerns identified.

I have asked all leaders across the agency to review the Federal Employee Viewpoint survey results, engage employees in the findings, and craft actions and strategies that address work environment issues. The conversations we've begun are similar to others taking place across the agency. And, agency-wide, we have work to do to address work environment issues for employees.

Some of the broad themes that emerged from our conversations:

BUDGET -- The decline and shifts in budget allocation have been felt across all Forest Service program areas and reflect the difficult choices needed to meet the goal of fiscal restraint and cost-effective spending as we sustain the health, diversity and productivity of the nation's forests and grasslands. Reallocating scarcer resources following budget cuts inevitably requires that tough choices be made.



LEADERSHIP CONNECTION AND TRUST – there is work to do to strengthen communications, listening, and responding to employee concerns. Leadership’s relationship and reputation with the workforce is strained. Employees are looking for visible support for law enforcement, ensuring LEI is taken seriously and that leadership trusts and cares for its employees.

EMPLOYEE RELATIONS, LABOR RELATIONS AND EMPLOYEE COMPLAINTS – concerns expressed ranged from situations where employees believe needed disciplinary actions were not taken; employees experiencing retaliation have no redress; and concerns about the transparency of personnel investigations and the role of LEI personnel in investigations.

CAREER OPPORTUNITIY & DEVELOPMENT – concerns expressed range from hiring policies, training opportunities, lateral transfers, TOS, career ladders and promotions.

SAFETY – there are concerns about ensuring a positive work environment (caring, improved morale, etc.), providing appropriate equipment in order to complete the job effectively and safely and concerns about the amount of ground a single resource may currently cover.

CONSISTENCY OF POLICY INTERPRETATION AND APPLICATION – concerns were raised about equity regarding pay, overtime, government shutdown and annual leave expectations, and telework.

CLEAR ORGANIZATIONAL VISION – this concern is related to ensuring the mission of LEI is understood by key stakeholders (NFS, Sheriffs, public users), it also touches on how LEI is integrated into the FS overall mission and the overarching purpose of law enforcement in a land and resource management agency.

With these areas as the broad background the immediate steps we are taking include:

- We will examine options for filling key positions, ensuring basic patrol and investigation capacity and ensuring adequate travel budget to train and deploy effectively.
- We will immediately be looking at assertions of retaliation, hostile work environment/behavior and prohibited personnel practices to assess if investigation is needed or if additional review is warranted.
- We will bring Human Resource Management and LEI leadership together to review lateral reassignment practices and policy and AUO and overtime pay policy to ensure we are using appropriate sideboards and interpretation of OPM and agency guidance.
- We will begin a work environment climate assessment to gather specific information to set expectations and accountability for LEI leadership and supervisors.
- We will assess the current relationship of LEI leadership and 5300 local NFFE to strengthen the working arrangements

- We will charge a team, including an interagency representative, to conduct a program review of LEI to assess program delivery and service, integration, mission and role clarity and strategies to strengthen the LEI program.

Also, during the meeting I committed to share the chat pod and audio comments with you. However, after I thought about this I have decided that this would not be in agreement with the ground rules we established for the meeting. This conversation was a confidential exchange between me and employees. We committed to use this information only as a way for you to share your candid feedback and inform us of the concerns and workplace challenges you face. The aim was to build trust between us so you provide frank, confidential information to your leaders so we can move forward together. To meet that commitment, I wanted to avoid the risk of this material going beyond those that participated in the meeting so we do nothing to quell the productive conversations; violate the trust we are seeking to establish together or the ground rules we initially set to encourage your frank feedback in the first place. Everyone who contributed their comments deserves that respect and courtesy. I will commit to subsequently share the detailed content analysis when it becomes available.

Finally, I know we have work to do and I am going to ask for your patience as we initiate these first steps. I will make the commitment to keep you all apprised as these steps unfold to grow a stronger LEI program and organization.

/s/ Thomas L. Tidwell
THOMAS L. TIDWELL
Chief

cc: Matthew P Valenta
Chris Berry
Debbie Kaufman
Lenise Lago
Leslie Weldon
Faye L Krueger
Daniel Jiron
Calvin Joyner
Nora Rasure
Randy Moore
Kent Connaughton
Liz Agpaoa
Kathleen Atkinson
Beth Pendleton