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Sent: Thursday, March 27, 2008 8:12 AM
Subject: Forest Service Move

Forest Service May Move to Interior

Some See Agency As Out of Place Under the USDA
By Christopher Lee
Washington Post Staff Writer
Tuesday, March 25, 2008; A03

In Washington, the organizational chart helps bring order to chaos, sorting the many federal agencies of the vast bureaucracy into manageable boxes. Among some lawmakers who hold the purse strings, there is a belief that the U.S. Forest Service is out of place.

The 103-year-old agency, which manages 193 million acres of forests and grasslands, is part of the Department of Agriculture. Its bureaucratic cousins -- the National Park Service, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the Bureau of Land Management, which manage 84 million acres, 96 million acres and 258 million acres of public land, respectively -- are in the Interior Department.

The five agencies have overlapping missions that include fire prevention and suppression, natural resource conservation, fostering recreational uses, and regulating commercial activities such as logging, drilling, mining and livestock grazing.

At the request of the House Appropriations subcommittee on interior, environment and related agencies, the Government Accountability Office this month began examining whether it would make sense to move the Forest Service to Interior's purview. The subcommittee has jurisdiction over both agencies.

"The public perceives them as being very similar," said Robin M. Nazzaro, director of the Natural Resources and Environment group at GAO, which is conducting the study. "They've just asked us to look at, could any money be saved, and would it result in a more efficient, effective and coordinated management of federal lands and the natural resources?"

One argument in favor of such a move is that the Forest Service no longer is chiefly devoted to managing the harvesting of timber.

"Today the evolution of our forests has gone away from production and more towards preservation, and it seems to me that the natural move has made it over under the umbrella of the Department of the Interior rather than the Department of Agriculture," Rep. Todd Tiahrt (Kan.), the top Republican on the subcommittee, said at a Feb. 12 hearing on the agency.

Rep. Norm Dicks (D-Wash.), the panel's chairman, believes such a move would help shore up the Forest Service's budget and align agencies with similar missions, said his spokesman, George Behan.

"You have more recreational campground areas in the Forest Service than you do even in the Park Service," Behan said. "So there's a logical reason for considering it. However, the question has to be asked, 'Is it the best thing for each agency and for land management?' "

But transforming bureaucracies is easier said than done, and one reason is that the mere talk of it often generates anxiety among entrenched interests with something to lose, said Don Kettl, director of the Fels Institute of Government at the University of Pennsylvania.

In this case, moving the Forest Service to Interior might send a symbolic message that national forests are to be preserved and enjoyed, not harvested and developed, Kettl said, which could be perceived as a threat to the timber industry.

"Changing organizational structure creates political battles among people who will worry about the role and nature of the organizations," Kettl said. "Moving these organizations around is never an easy thing. . . . Different organizational structures can make things better, but the process of moving boxes is a lot harder than just drawing organization charts."

An Interior spokesman said the department has no position on the matter. Mark E. Rey, USDA's undersecretary for natural resources and environment, said the department will cooperate with the study "and when we see what the results are, we'll take a position on it."

The idea of moving the agency is not new. Federal officials have discussed similar bureaucratic consolidations for years. In 1991, then-Rep. Leon E. Panetta (D-Calif.), chairman of the House Budget Committee, proposed combining the Interior, Agriculture and Energy departments into a new Department of Natural Resources, as part of a larger plan to collapse 14 Cabinet-level departments into six.

In 1983, a commission appointed by President Ronald Reagan to find remedies for waste in government recommended combining administrative functions of the Forest Service and the BLM. And in 1970, a bipartisan commission created by Congress suggested folding the Forest Service into Interior and renaming it, as Panetta later wanted to, the Department of Natural Resources.