

Statement by Aníbal Acevedo-Vilá

Resources Committee

Subcommittee on Forests and Forests

Hearing on Eco-Terrorism and Lawlessness on the National Forests

Tuesday, February 12, 2002

I thank Chairman McInnis, Ranking Member Inslee, the witnesses here today, and my colleagues for focusing on eco-terrorism and lawlessness on the National Forests. My district plays host to the Caribbean National Forest (CNF), a 28,000-acre treasure that is the only tropical forest in the U.S. National Forest System. While the CNF (commonly known as El Yunque) provides a unique and lasting experience to its visitors and plays an important role in our National Forest System and for the environment of Puerto Rico, it is far from immune to lawlessness and eco-terror.

Over the past 50 years, visitations to the CNF have continued to escalate. More than 850,000 people visit the CNF annually and over half of these visitors are from the 50 states. Additionally, there is an increasing human population living within the urban interface between municipalities CNF lands. These factors have created an almost insurmountable challenge when faced with having to provide protection and safety of visitors and Forest Service employees, compliance with regulations and protection of Government property and National Forest resources.

Today there are two full time Law Enforcement Officers (LEOs) and one full time resident supervisor expected to cover a 28,000-acre area that receives intense visitation and must be protected and patrolled on a 24-hour basis. The CNF LEOs not only have to combat crimes against persons, they also enforce regulations and laws relating to forest product theft, destruction of Government property, sanitation, encroachments, closure orders, traffic, occupancy and use, off road vehicles, and regulations for developed and undeveloped recreation areas.

The fact that we are here today focusing on eco-terror and lawlessness on National Forest Lands shows that this problem is clearly not unique to the Caribbean National Forest. This issue has become a national problem. Staff levels that once proved capable of deterring crimes associated with National Forest System lands are no longer sufficient.

The National Forest System has more acreage and visitations than the National Park System (NPS) and the Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) combined. Reported criminal activity is significantly higher on National Forest System lands too, yet there are some six times the number of LEOs serving under the NPS and USFWS than serving under the FS. Furthermore, each FS LEO is responsible for patrolling an average area of 591 square miles, while an NPS LEO patrols an average area of 56 square miles and an USFWS LEO patrols an average area of 151 square miles. ⁽¹⁾

In fiscal year 2001, there were 751 reports of criminal activity in the CNF, 244 warning notices issued, and 413 documented incidents left unresolved. Many of these crimes are considered serious and violent. To exemplify the lawlessness and eco-terrorism in the CNF, I have listed below some recent examples of the crimes we face in El Yunque. They include:

February 1, 2002 - Forest visitors were robbed at gunpoint while visiting the Big Tree Trail. A stolen Lexus vehicle occupied by three suspects was identified as responsible for the incidents. After a chase involving FS Law Enforcement and Investigations personnel, two suspects were apprehended and the Lexus vehicle was recovered.

November / December, 2001 - Two illegal alcohol production facilities that were operated on FS lands were found and destroyed.

July 2001 - Two forest visitors were victims of a car jacking on Hwy. 191. Their vehicle was stolen at gunpoint by two suspects.

Forest visitors were robbed at gunpoint while they were parked at the Las Cabezas overlook. Credit cards, cash, and other belongings were stolen.

April 2001 - Endangered Puerto Rican Parrots stolen. USFWS Parrot aviary is burglarized. Suspects removed 2 endangered Puerto Rican Parrots and 8 Dominican Parrots. The case is still under investigation by USFWS and FS.

Stream Poisoning and Illegal Shrimp Harvesting on the Caribbean National Forest -

The Caribbean National Forest currently does not allow fishing in the Forest. Yet, illegal shrimp harvesting has been an on-going issue on the CNF for many years. One method of illegal shrimp harvesting is adding chemicals streams which cuts off the source of oxygen, causing the shrimp to rise to the surface where they are then caught in nets. The illegal use of chemicals such as bleach and pesticides has been increasing over the years.

Recently, a man with a criminal record was detained by citizens who found him within the Caribbean National Forest using a dangerous pesticide known as cypermethrin which can affect the central nervous system of humans and is highly toxic to fish and aquatic invertebrates.

During the last year the number of official and unofficial reports of these incidents have been increasing considerably. Within a one-month period, five incidents were reported. Lack of specialized law enforcement personnel in the Forest make the detection of these violations difficult.

Mr. Chairman, these examples represent only a few of the recent crimes committed in the CNF. I believe this committee must work to provide adequate resources to our law enforcement personnel in the Forest Service. Too much is at stake to let these problems go unchecked. The Forest Supervisor in the CNF, Mr. Pablo Cruz, has made clear that he and the LEOs face incredible challenges with very limited resources. We, as Members of this Subcommittee should focus on authorization legislation that will provide adequate and necessary resources to the Forest Service to protect both the visitors and the cherished natural resources of these important lands.

I look forward to working with the Subcommittee to find necessary and lasting relief to the problems caused by lawlessness and eco-terrorism in the National Forest System.

¹ These numbers are based upon a 1997 U.S. Marshall Service survey.

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