

Committee on Resources

Witness Testimony

Testimony on
Oversight Hearing on
the implications to public domain national forest should a bill to require the appointment of the Chief of the Forest Service by the President, by and with the advice and consent of the Senate
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Before the
House of Representatives
Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health
September 16, 1997

Madam Chairman and Members of the Committee:

I appreciate the opportunity to appear today and offer my views on the question of whether the Chief of the Forest Service should be appointed by the President and subject to confirmation by the Senate. I believe the Chief should be subject to confirmation.

My qualifications for offering an opinion on this issue come from my 36 years with the Forest Service, including serving nearly seven years as Associate Chief. During my time in the Washington Office, I worked closely with four Chiefs on a wide variety of issues. I believe I have a good understanding of the requirements and demands of the office as well as the qualifications essential to success.

I am representing myself at this hearing. However, over the last 18 months I have worked with a number of other retired Forest Service career executives in reviewing legislative proposals relating to the agency, specifically the proposals being considered by the Chairman's colleague from Idaho, Senator Craig. Based on this effort, as well as other contacts with retirees, I believe my views are shared by many other retirees.

The National Forests represent a tremendous legacy. The American people are entitled to the assurance that these lands and the priceless resources they contain are competently and professionally managed. I believe that this can best be assured by providing a management agency composed of well-qualified, career professional and technical employees led by an experienced natural resource manager who has demonstrated executive ability in the management of a large professional organization such as the Forest Service.

The tradition of appointing a career, professional natural resource manager from the ranks of the agency served the agency and the public well for over 85 years. Promoting from within the agency assured that not only was the Chief technically qualified, but he had an understanding of how the agency functioned, the unique budgetary process of the agency, and especially, the historic relationships with state and local governments and other agencies.

Frankly, most Forest Service retirees would like to see a return to the long-ten-n tradition of appointing the Chief from the ranks of the Forest Service and having the Chief retain career status in the Senior Executive

Service. But we recognize that it is almost impossible to turn back the clock. When this Administration decided to end the tradition of designating a career senior executive and made the position a political appointment, important protections for the professionalism of the agency were lost.

It is true that the two individuals who have received political appointments as Chief have been career Government employees, each with many years with the Forest Service. However, the nature of their appointments and their relationships with others in the Administration have fundamentally changed the character and stature of the Chief's job.

It is important that efforts be made to reestablish the integrity and stature of the position, if the Chief is to function effectively as both agency head and leader of forestry in this country. I believe making the Chief subject to Senate confirmation would be an important and useful step.

I have reviewed H.R. 817 in this regard. The bill provides "The Chief shall be appointed from among persons who have substantial experience and demonstrated competence in forest land management and natural resource conservation." I urge that this section be significantly strengthened.

The Chief should have demonstrated experience and competence in forest land management and natural resource conservation. The Chief should also have experience in leading a large, natural resource agency; a basic understanding of Federal budget and personnel procedures; knowledge of the relationships among Federal forestry programs and state and private forestry programs. and an understanding of the legislative framework which guides National Forest management, forest research, and the state and private forestry activities of the agency.

I recognize that a long laundry list of qualifications may not be appropriate in legislation, but if subjecting the Chief to Senate confirmation is to be meaningful, it must be clear that the Congress expects the nominee to be well qualified, ready to become quickly effective and of the caliber necessary to command respect within the agency, the Administration, and throughout the natural resource field.

The Forest Service is not an independent agency. It is properly a part of the executive branch, subject to policy direction from the Secretary of Agriculture. It is essential, however, that the incumbent have standing within the profession, with the Administration and with the public so as to be an effective advocate for responsible, professionally sound management where appropriate.

This Subcommittee may, also, want to consider setting a fixed term for appointment of the Chief. This would provide the Chief with a measure of independence which would help to assure the Congress that the Chief could advocate the needs of sound land and resource management and not be subject to adhering only to what was deemed politically correct in order to retain the job. A set term could, also, keep the position out of the terrible hiatus which occurs at the beginning of new Presidential terms.

Providing effective leadership for an agency like the Forest Service is absolutely essential. I thank the Subcommittee for giving attention to this issue.

Madam Chairman, I would be happy to respond to any questions.

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