

Testimony Of Mary Pletcher, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Human Capital and Diversity, United States Department of the Interior, February 26, 2014, House of Representatives Committee on Natural Resources, Subcommittee on Energy and Mineral Resources, Oversight Hearing on "American Energy Jobs: Opportunities for Veterans"

Mr. Chairman and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to update you on the Department of the Interior's efforts to bring veterans into our workforce. Let me begin by describing the Department's overall efforts and accomplishments at attracting and hiring veterans of the Armed Forces, I will then provide specific examples of how the Department's bureaus, including those with energy programs, have hired veterans into their workforces.

We recognize, understand and believe in our Nation's commitment to veterans' employment. Since 2010, the Department has been active in establishing long-term relationships with federal agencies, schools, veteran's organizations and military organizations that allow the Department to attract and retain our Nation's veterans. The Department and our bureaus have entered into formal agreements with the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Office of the Chief, Army Reserve. I am proud of the fact that the Department was the first federal agency to sign an agreement with the Office of the Chief, Army Reserve, that focused on connecting reserve service members to employment opportunities; connecting military youth and families to America's great outdoors, history and culture; and expanding recreational opportunities for community-based wounded warrior programs. We see great value in our relationship with the Army Reserve. We will continue this relationship, as well as our many local relationships into the future.

The Department's Veteran's Employment Program manager, Martin Pursley, a service-disabled, retired, Army, combat, senior, non-commissioned officer, has worked tirelessly to establish a positive relationship with Wounded Warrior Programs throughout the country, the Department of Veterans Affairs Veteran Employment Services Office, Regional Veterans Affairs Employment Coordinators, military transition points, veteran service organizations and numerous other veteran focused activities.

To attract veterans, the Department offers various tools such as recruitment incentives; Superior Qualifications and Special Needs Pay-Setting Authority –where the rate of pay is set higher than Step 1 of the appropriate General Schedule grade, providing annual leave earned based on both military and non-federal jobs; Student Loan Repayment;

and on a limited basis, paid relocation. The Department also uses Veterans Recruitment Appointment and 30 Percent or More Disabled Veteran authorities to non-competitively appoint qualified veterans. Similarly, the Department uses Schedule A hiring authority to directly appoint qualified veterans.

Our efforts have been very successful. Today, veterans comprise 16% of the Department of the Interior workforce of 70,000 employees. The Department is increasing its hiring of veterans who were not previously federal civilian employees. The share of veterans entering our permanent workforce has increased substantially the last few years. In 2010, 29% of new permanent federal employees were veterans; by 2013, that percentage had increased to 40% of all new permanent hires. The percent of service-disabled veterans hired more than doubled from 3.1% in fiscal year 2009 to 7% in fiscal year 2013.

Veterans represent 22% of the workforce in our bureaus with energy programs, including the Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement; Bureau of Ocean Energy Management; Bureau of Land Management; and Office of Surface Mining, Reclamation and Enforcement. In the Bureau of Reclamation, veterans comprise 31% of the workforce.

Now let me share some specific examples of how we have hired veterans into our workforce.

The Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement has had great success working with the United States Coast Guard's ocean vessel inspection training program to attract veterans. As a result, of the 49 inspectors hired in 2013, 27 (55%) are veterans.

The Bureau of Land Management has partnered with the Department of Veterans Affairs to place service-disabled veterans in petroleum engineer technician positions. BLM is also partnering with Phoenix College and the Phoenix and Maricopa County Workforce Connections for a unique 16-week training program to prepare veterans for a rewarding career in conservation and resource management.

The Wildland Fire Program developed a Wildland Fire Career Road Map web page to assist separating service members and veterans in finding jobs as wildland firefighters or in other occupations in the Wildland Fire Management Program. The wildland fire community partners with conservation corps organizations to attract veterans into these jobs. In 2012, BLM sponsored all-veteran crews in six states with commendable results. According to one supervisor, veterans "are people who are used to working hard and being away from home a long time. They know how to work with others, they know how to take on an assignment. There will be lots of good future leaders coming out of this program. I'd put them up against any crew anywhere."

The National Park Service hired Andrew Goodrich, a combat wounded Marine veteran, through the Operation Warfighter program in 2011. As the National Park Service's first Emergency Response Ranger, Andrew brings his military experience to programs that

focus on emergency medical services, search and rescue, law enforcement and emergency management. Ranger Goodrich also designed and operates the National Park Service's Wounded Warrior and Veteran Program – Operation Guardian. Through this program, the Park Service has successfully liaised with the Departments of Defense and Veterans Affairs to assist transitioning and recovering service-members re-integrate into civilian life by providing meaningful work experience with the National Park Service. This program has allowed the National Park Service to attract and transition top professionals into their workforce – increasing Park Service veteran hiring by over 30% in the last four years.

The Bureau of Reclamation successfully recruits veterans with the result that 43% of all new hires are veterans. Reclamation's success is evidenced at the Grand Coulee Dam, our Nation's largest electric power producing facility and one of the largest concrete structures in the world, where veterans comprise 52% of the workforce.

The Department's commitment to providing skills development and employment opportunities is realized across the Nation by the partnerships formed with local veterans groups, conservation corps and other groups to put veterans to work on our public lands. On a national level, this commitment is embodied through programs such as the Vets to Feds (V2F) Career Development Program, which placed veterans into our acquisition corps and the Veterans Affairs apprenticeship program, which placed service-disabled veterans in the critical occupation of petroleum engineering technician.

Although the Department is achieving success hiring veterans, we know we can accomplish more. We are researching the possibility of obtaining certification of our energy apprenticeship programs through the Department of Veterans Affairs so that veterans may use their GI-bill benefits to obtain the training and work experience necessary to help meet our need for a highly skilled workforce. We also plan to pursue partnerships with veteran organizations at higher education institutions that offer energy related curriculum – such as Student Veterans of America and other veteran student associations.

On behalf of the more than 10,800 veterans working at the Department of the Interior, I thank you for your support and interest in our efforts to employ veterans.

This concludes my prepared remarks and I welcome any questions you might have.