

STATEMENT OF DANIEL N. WENK, ACTING DIRECTOR, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS, FORESTS AND PUBLIC LANDS OF THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES, OVERSIGHT HEARING ON RESTORING THE FEDERAL PUBLIC LANDS WORKFORCE

MARCH 19, 2009

Mr. Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today at this oversight hearing on restoring the Federal public lands workforce. My remarks will focus on the progress we are making in addressing workforce issues within the National Park Service (NPS), including those affecting the U.S. Park Police, as well as areas that require more attention. They will also include a brief discussion of workforce issues that are being addressed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM).

The NPS and BLM have a strong interest in their employees' career development and satisfaction, and their workplace concerns. Both bureaus have implemented wide-ranging, positive programs to enhance the quality of the work experience and prepare employees – and the organizations – for the future. In national surveys of Federal employees conducted by the Office of Personnel Management (OPM), a large majority of employees in the NPS and BLM say that they like the work they do, feel that it is important, and that it provides a sense of personal accomplishment. While these findings are gratifying, other findings show room for improvement. And, as in any organization, continued improvements can and will be made. The NPS and BLM both are working to create a more productive, satisfying and rewarding workplace.

National Park Service

These are promising times for the NPS workforce. Our bureau enjoys strong support from our new President and Secretary, and from Congress. We have embarked on preparing for the NPS Centennial in 2016 with substantial increases in operating funds in the last two fiscal years, which will be followed, if Congress approves the President's request, with another substantial increase in FY 2010. Those increases have provided for hiring 3,000 seasonal employees and making many improvements at our parks. We have moved forward on many new partnership projects and programs as part of our Centennial Initiative. The NPS was fortunate to receive \$750 million from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, which will be put to good use addressing the maintenance backlog and constructing new facilities, with an emphasis on energy-efficiency projects, youth work projects, and rehabilitation of treasured landscapes and structures.

Other trends are also contributing to employee morale. Our 275 million visitors continue to have positive experiences, as demonstrated by visitor surveys which consistently show a satisfaction rate in the mid-90 percent range. We now reach 60 million people through our website, which improves in quality each year. Preview showings of a Ken Burns film series on the history of the national parks that will air in September, 2009, have generated enormous excitement within NPS. The ranks of volunteers at national parks continue to grow, with our 2008 count at 172,000. The National Park Service leadership recognizes that none of the success we have as an agency, none of the support we enjoy from political leaders and the public, would be possible without the hard work, commitment, and enthusiasm of our 20,000 employees. Our efforts, within budgetary and administrative constraints, are focused on ensuring that we have a skilled,

efficient, and satisfied workforce as we move into our second century of service to the American people. Recent budget increases in FY 2008 and FY 2009 have heightened these efforts.

Recent Workforce Management Accomplishments

The NPS has taken several steps recently to improve the skills of our workforce, including:

- *Initiating a New Superintendent's Academy.* In 2008, NPS launched a new formal training program for first-time superintendents. The program addresses key competencies required of superintendents through an 18-month program tailored to each participant's developmental needs.
- *Completing and implementing the NPS Learning and Development Report.* In 2007, the NPS carried out a year-long, comprehensive review of training and development across the Service. Its recommendations will significantly change the infrastructure, operations, and curriculum of the learning and development program.
- *Establishing partnerships with universities for leadership development.* Growing out of the Learning and Development Report, NPS has undertaken a new initiative to work with partnering universities to enhance our leadership development opportunities. At a summit of university and non-profit partners in the fall of 2008, this "Leadership Roundtable Group" laid the groundwork for what is envisioned as an institutionalized effort to identify and address NPS leadership training needs.
- *Improving the applicant pool through an on-line hiring system.* The NPS has been implementing the USAStaffing system, developed by the Office of Personnel Management (OPM). As one of the last large agencies that did not have an on-line application procedure, NPS was losing top-quality applicants to other agencies whose

automated staffing processes made it easier for candidates to apply and allowed agencies to respond to applicants more quickly. USAStaffing performs an initial screening and evaluation of job applicants, speeding up the otherwise labor-intensive process of candidate referral to managers seeking to fill vacancies.

- *Developing a culture of safety awareness.* Recognizing that traditional approaches to workplace safety management were insufficient to address the wide range of hazardous jobs and tasks throughout the NPS workforce, in May 2007, the NPS established a Safety Leadership Council to reexamine and reenergize the safety efforts ongoing within the NPS. A key result has been the adoption of a U.S. Coast Guard safety program for our own use. “Operational Leadership,” as we have dubbed it, is a bottom-up approach to safety awareness that emphasizes the responsibility of all employees for their own safety and that of their co-workers.
- *Adopting Professional Excellence as a Centennial goal.* Reflecting our deep belief in the importance of supporting our workforce, the NPS established “Professional Excellence” as one of 5 overarching themes of our Centennial Initiative in our Report to the President in May, 2008. Goals within this theme include advancing the NPS to become one of the top 10 places to work in America, promoting a safety and health culture for all employees and visitors, and establishing a structured professional development curriculum to provide park managers with the skills to apply best business practices and superior leadership.

The NPS has also taken steps to better understand and respond to the concerns of the workforce. In response to the unsatisfactory results of the 2007 Best Places to Work analysis conducted by

the Partnership for Public Service, which was based on the 2006 OPM Federal Human Capital Survey, the NPS leadership commissioned a team of diverse employees from all regions and from a range of skill areas to analyze the NPS results and recommend actions for improvement. This team's recommendations principally addressed training and development, leadership communications to the workforce, and efforts to make the survey available to a broader range of NPS employees. Recommendations involving training and development were incorporated into the comprehensive review of NPS training and development that was underway at that time.

In addition, the NPS entered into an agreement with the National Parks Conservation Association's Center for Park Management to support NPS' efforts to achieve the Centennial "Professional Excellence" goal of becoming one of the top 10 places to work. A series of focus groups were also conducted in the fall of 2008 that included not only full-time permanent employees but also seasonal and term employees, who are not provided access by OPM to the survey. These focus groups collected information using many of the survey question areas. Focus-group data will help us to analyze the 2008 survey results in more depth.

Progress on Law Enforcement Workforce Issues

In February 2008, the Department's Office of Inspector General released its "Assessment of the United States Park Police," containing twenty recommendations for improvements. Following receipt of this report, the Department and the NPS installed a Command Management Team to oversee the operation of the Park Police and to address the weaknesses which had been identified in the report. Salvatore Lauro, a former Park Police official with 32 years of law enforcement experience, was named Chief of Police in January following ten months of overseeing Park

Police operations on an interim basis. Chief Lauro is working with the NPS to fill vacancies in various command level positions. Sergeant and lieutenant positions are being filled from the first new promotional list in five years.

A major portion of the Inspector General's report focused on the level of security at national icons, but the report also covered significant officer safety issues, including:

- *Staffing.* The Park Police has been reassessing staffing levels and priorities to identify the most efficient and practicable means of addressing mission needs and alleviating officer safety concerns. We anticipate reaching 630 sworn police officers by the end of the FY 2009.
- *Firearms qualifications.* We now have a computer application suitable for tracking firearms-qualification statistics and have developed a standardized data collection format. The Park Police force was in compliance with firearms-qualifications standards for the last two quarterly reports to the Secretary.
- *Ballistic vests.* In the spring of 2008, the Park Police conducted a comprehensive inventory that documented the status of body armor issued to every officer. As a result, working with the vest manufacturer, the Park Police worked to ensure that any officer wearing a vest that was not National Institutes of Justice-compliant was properly fitted with an appropriate replacement vest. All officers now have compliant vests, with the exception of the 35 new recruits who will receive their body armor prior to graduating from training. Additionally, each supervisor is required to check the condition of subordinate personnel vests on an annual basis.

- *Vehicles.* In coordination with the NPS Comptroller, the Park Police has completed a Fleet Management Strategic Plan and submitted orders for FY 2009 and FY 2010 consistent with this plan. The 110 vehicles received this year have replaced high-mileage vehicles. A comprehensive evaluation of the vehicle needs is underway.

In addition, as a result of low workforce morale and other concerns, the Park Police developed a partnership with the OPM Center for Talent Services to conduct an Organizational Assessment Survey designed to assess workplace culture and climate. This survey was administered by personnel research psychologists with the objective of further identifying specific concerns employees had with regard to their workforce environment and the resources they needed to carry out the mission. As a follow-up to the survey administration, representatives from the various geographic locations covered by the Park Police were invited to participate in focus groups for both non-supervisory and supervisory officers as well as civilian employees. These focus groups were designed to elicit specific suggestions for improvement. Information from both the survey and the focus groups is being reviewed and evaluated by the research psychologists who will recommend specific goals on which the organization as a whole should focus in order to address employee concerns. These recommendations will be further developed through an employee-driven action planning process that empowers teams to formulate specific actions and recommendations for improving morale and organizational effectiveness.

In addition to providing a structure for engaging employees in the decision-making process, OPM will be providing an intensive leadership development and training program designed to

identify individual strengths and weaknesses as well as strategies for improving the effectiveness of the Force's managers and leaders.

The NPS law enforcement workforce also includes park law enforcement rangers. Rangers who work in the 19 national park units along the border with Mexico, in particular, face serious safety issues due to the growth in illegal cross-border activities. The NPS has taken steps to improve employee safety there by implementing operational protocols for "working on the border" which include check in/out procedures, working in pairs, and receiving specialized training. Additional rangers have been hired, and high-risk areas are being closed to visitors and staff as necessary. A digital, encrypted radio system has also been installed to provide seamless communication between the NPS and U.S. Border Patrol personnel. A significant budget increase of \$8.5 million was enacted for FY 2009 to accelerate this important endeavor.

NPS staff in border parks, north and south, have increased collaborative efforts with sister agencies. At Big Bend National Park, the NPS hosts U.S. Border Patrol agents who live in and are stationed within the boundaries of the park. The parks have increased coordination with the U.S. Coast Guard, U.S. Border Patrol, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), and the other land management agencies and tribes. In conducting periodic operations aimed at interdicting the high level of smuggling by boat, and along the northern border, NPS rangers in some parks have been cross-designated as U.S. Customs Inspectors. Additionally, the Caribbean parks are currently working closely with ICE to obtain dispatch services for law enforcement operations.

Areas of Concern in NPS Workforce Management

The NPS leadership believes more effort needs to be made in the areas of increasing the diversity of the workforce, continued improvement in training and recruitment, resolving the “6(c)” law enforcement retirement benefits issue, improving capacity in contracting and workforce management, and addressing other employee concerns.

To have a workforce that better represents the growing diversity of the U.S. population, we have developed and are working to meet diversity recruitment goals. We participate in outreach activities with several national-level organizations that represent minority population groups. Our Recruitment Futures Implementation Team (RFIT) has completed its third year of supporting job fairs, training NPS employees who serve as recruiters at specific schools or events, and working with a consortium of minority-serving schools to sponsor targeted recruitment events.

A minority youth intake initiative was developed by Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area that brings students from minority-serving high schools to work as park interns, and we are exploring the possibilities for expanding this initiative to other parks for recruiting outreach to minorities at early ages. In addition, the Office of Workforce Management and the Youth Programs Division have initiated a collaboration involving programs supported by the division (Youth Conservation Corps, Public Lands Corps, Youth Partnerships Program, Student Conservation Association) to channel their participants to programs aimed at higher-level students as they outgrow their initial program. We are also developing stronger connections between human resource recruitment planning and the potential candidates these programs

provide. Promoting youth conservation work at our national parks is a high priority for Secretary Salazar, and we anticipate more efforts in this area as we move forward.

NPS is continuing to work toward improving employee training and development programs and recruitment efforts. We plan to fully develop a proposal for turning Mather Training Center into a NPS distance-learning center and determine what will be required to make better use of our TELNET capacity. We also plan to develop a new employee orientation package for all new employees, partners, concessionaires and volunteers. Aligned with a Departmental initiative on learning and development, we are working with other bureaus to develop comprehensive training for new supervisors, which will help respond to the message of the 2006 Federal Human Capital Survey results (which was reconfirmed in the 2008 results) that new supervisors' lack of awareness in their supervisory responsibilities is a major workplace issue for our employees.

We are also poised to begin the design of the Career Fields Foundations Academy, which will target seven NPS Career Field tracks in an effort to provide sequential, competency-based training as a follow-on to the Fundamentals course currently provided for all new employees. As a program that will require significant resources to fully develop and implement, this project is currently pending the availability of funding. NPS piloted a centralized summer seasonal hiring effort in 2008 to facilitate the hiring of the 3,000 seasonal employees made possible by Centennial Initiative funding. This centralized effort has the added benefit of enabling us to provide more focused attention on outreach to diverse candidates.

On the employee benefits front, one of the most difficult issues we have faced is the provision of enhanced retirement benefits for law enforcement park rangers. Resolving the so-called “6c” problem (from the law providing enhanced benefits, 5 USC 8336(c)) would go a long way toward addressing the damage to morale that has been caused by the disparity in the handling of claims of law enforcement rangers, who we believe should be considered law enforcement personnel, and therefore should be eligible for the enhanced benefits. The NPS is continuing to work with the Departmental office that is responsible for adjudicating the claims to resolve this matter.

Recognizing the serious lack of capacity in several of our administrative functions, notably contracting, human resources, and learning and development, we are developing servicewide strategies to support the budget needs of these functions after many years of decreasing capacity. Budget increases were provided by Congress in each of these functional areas for FY 2009. We believe that we must invest in the training needs of the employees in these disciplines if we are to provide employees with the competencies needed to proactively manage new initiatives and programs rather than reactively process individual transactions as they have done in the past.

We are just now receiving the results from OPM’s 2008 Federal Human Capital Survey, the basis for what will be the 2009 Best Places to Work rankings. Early indications are that many of the issues identified in the 2006 survey (training, supervisory skills, communication, leadership, workload and lack of resources) continue as issues. Most of the NPS’ efforts undertaken in response to the 2007 Best Places to Work rankings are just now beginning to be implemented, so it is unlikely that the 2008 survey and the 2009 rankings will register very much change.

However, we believe that we are pursuing appropriate actions to improve the work environment and the workplace practices that will address these concerns.

Bureau of Land Management

The BLM's multiple-use mission and responsibilities are uniquely varied and complex, and its mission requires a wide range of occupations and skill sets, ranging from wildlife biologists, to cadastral surveyors, to petroleum engineers, to financial managers. The BLM has long recognized that its success rests entirely on the collective knowledge, experience, and dedication of this diverse workforce. This understanding is fundamental in the BLM, and it motivates and shapes the BLM's wide-ranging efforts to recruit, develop, and retain highly skilled and satisfied employees.

BLM's Human Capital Management Program

The BLM has established a Human Capital Management Program (HCMP) to enhance the quality of the work experience of its employees and prepare for the future. The HCMP has four key goals and components:

- Recruit skilled and diverse candidates;
- Enhance skills and prepare employees for greater responsibilities;
- Retain satisfied and motivated employees; and
- Engage employees in reaching performance goals and recognize achievements.

The BLM has established a variety of programs to advance these goals and is continually working to improve the morale and effectiveness of employees.

BLM's Workforce Planning

The BLM is committed to recruiting a diverse workforce that reflects the multicultural heritage of the American people. This can be a special challenge for natural resource management agencies, which have offices in some locations where populations may be less diverse. The BLM has established programs that reach out and encourage minority candidates to consider a career in public service with the BLM. For example, through partnerships with the Historical Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), the Bureau recruits students at Alabama A&M University, Alcorn State University, and other HCBUs. A similar partnership was recently established with Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs), and the BLM now conducts recruiting at primarily Native American schools such as Salish Kootenai College in Montana and Ogalala Dakota College in South Dakota. The BLM has also established an agreement with the League of United Latin American Citizens to build a program to increase awareness within the Hispanic community of the BLM and its career opportunities.

In addition to building a diverse workforce, the BLM is working to prepare employees for career advancement and to assume future leadership positions. These efforts are critical, because over 25 percent of the BLM's employees are eligible to retire in the next 3 years. Nearly half of the BLM's leaders are eligible to retire within the next 5 years. The BLM has established a series of training and succession programs to prepare for this transition. The first, "Pathways", introduces new employees to the BLM's history, scope of work, and diverse career opportunities. The second, "Emerging Leaders", targets mid-level employees with an interest in leadership positions. The final program is the BLM's Leadership Academy, which prepares selected candidates for positions of mid-level and above leadership. The BLM leadership invests time

and energy into these programs, including providing opportunities to meet and talk with senior BLM officials.

BLM's Focus on Enhancing Skills

The BLM has a long-standing commitment to and emphasis on developing a highly professional and diverse workforce using a wide variety of educational opportunities. To help achieve this, in 1969 the BLM established a National Employee Development program which is now housed at the BLM National Training Center (NTC) in Phoenix, Arizona. The program and the center have become world-class institutions which meet multi-agency training needs through the offering of over 200 courses annually in natural and cultural resource management and leadership development. The BLM's Employee Development program has become a pioneer in distance learning, providing a web-based Knowledge Resource Center (KRC) for just-in-time information and web-based courses and training broadcasts to over 130 BLM satellite network sites nationally. The Employee Development program and NTC serves more than 4,400 employees each year through instructor-lead training. Nearly every BLM employee accesses some type of on-line course or utilizes the KRC numerous times throughout his or her careers.

The NTC is more than a training facility. It has become a town center and crossroads for the BLM community, where employees discuss issues, share experiences, and develop better approaches for protecting wildlife habitat, fighting wildfire, providing energy resources, and managing the diverse uses of America's public lands. While the training programs at the NTC remain central to enhancing employees' skills, other initiatives are making important contributions to the BLM's workforce development, including a greater emphasis on coaching

and mentoring employees, the use of action learning teams and the development of well-designed employee performance plans.

The Federal Human Capital Survey

The BLM is both interested and deeply committed to knowing if our human capital management efforts are succeeding. We are continually working to improve and develop the best possible organization. The Office of Personnel Management (OPM) has conducted the Federal Human Capital Survey (FHCS) to help provide this insight. The survey began in 2002 and has been conducted biannually.

The latest FHCS was conducted in 2008 and its results were released recently. It surveyed more than 210,000 Federal employees on a wide range of issues, and the methodology provides comparison data across the last three surveys: 2004, 2006, and 2008. About 54 percent of BLM employees participated in the survey (compared to 51 percent government-wide). The BLM is now examining the results to learn its relative strengths and weaknesses and to identify areas for improvement. We have some initial conclusions.

A key strength of the BLM is that most of our employees feel the work they do is important. This sense of commitment and united purpose is perhaps our greatest asset. Additional strengths include: a cooperative workforce; employee satisfaction with work-life balance and an understanding among employees of how their work relates to the agency's goals and priorities. Further, the 2008 survey showed positive overall trends for the BLM. In comparison with the

2006 Federal Human Capital Survey, the BLM improved on 54 of 73 questions by 2 percent points or more, including questions on leadership, diversity, and resources.

The survey also highlights areas of weakness that require greater attention. These areas include: recognition of performance, workload, and employee retention.

These survey results are being utilized to evolve and strengthen the BLM's continuing efforts to recruit, enhance, retain, and reward its workforce. The BLM's mission is complex and challenging, and its workforce is highly skilled and dedicated to managing the public lands for the American people. The BLM has a strong history of commitment to employee development and growth, and we remain committed to creating a more productive, satisfying and rewarding workplace.

Conclusion

Mr. Chairman, that concludes my prepared remarks. I would be happy to answer any questions you or the other members of the Subcommittee have.