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Why the Wilderness/Wild and Scenic Rivers Staff Should Remain Independent

History

The Wilderness and Wild and Scenic River Director was established in 2004. The key objectives for creating the separate staff as articulated by Tom L. Thompson, then Deputy Chief of NFS include:

- broaden our ownership of the wilderness and wild and scenic river resource, encouraging various staffs to give wilderness and wild and scenic rivers the integrated management they need and deserve;
- collaborate with partners and the National Forest Foundation to achieve the “10-year Wilderness Stewardship Challenge;”
- enhance our ability to meet our regulatory and stewardship responsibilities for Wild and Scenic Rivers;
- enhance our capacity for leadership within the National Wilderness Preservation System and within the global movement for protected area management;
- strengthen our relationships with nongovernmental and partner organizations that have long clamored for such a move; and
- raise public visibility of wilderness and wild and scenic rivers, thereby increasing understanding and support for these resources.

"The national wilderness and wild and scenic rivers program director play's an essential role in helping the agency continue to protect and manage 35 million acres of wilderness as well as thousands of miles of wild and scenic rivers," said Chief Dale Bosworth in 2006 when Chris Brown was named Director. (Today 36.6 million acres wilderness)

The Director is responsible for oversight of 448 Wilderness Areas (20% of the National Forest System, and over a third of the total National Wilderness Preservation System) and more than 4,000 miles of the National Wild and Scenic River System. Chief Bosworth and Deputy Chief Tom L. Thompson knew that the Forest Service needed to reclaim the Forest Service's tradition of leadership for Wilderness and Wild and Scenic Rivers by establishing the position in 2004.

These reasons are just as important today as they were two decades ago.

Leadership Considerations

Wilderness and Wild and Scenic Rivers make up over 20% of National Forest System acres. They require significant investment and leadership to manage properly. This change will significantly reduce the visibility of Wilderness and WSR programs within the agency, as it removes the Wilderness/WSR Director from having a seat at the table with the other major players making budget and policy decisions about the National Forest System.

Having both the Recreation and Wilderness Director provides additional strength to the Forest Service in understanding the human dimension of forest uses, special area management, and the integration of natural processes with social needs and desires. Having two Directors versed in the human side of forest management brings better diversity to management of the National Forest System than a Director cadre focused almost exclusively on products and outputs from the Forest.

It is important that wilderness has a leadership position in the agency, with access to key agency leadership and a place at the table for budget and policy decision-making. The presence of a Director-level position for Wilderness and WSR conveys volumes to the hundreds of USFS field staff who work in these programs. That USFS has a WWSR Director says to these staff: “ the universal pride that Forest Service leadership professes for its Wilderness and WSR programs is backed by an organizational commitment to give prominence and a place at the table for these programs; it makes us proud.”

Wilderness and Wild and Scenic River management are not done in the vacuum of the agency but are inter-agency efforts. The Wilderness Policy Council consists of top-tier Senior Executives from the NPS (one of the Associate Directors), BLM (Director for the National Landscape Conservation System), and US FWS (Director of the National Wildlife Refuge System), as well as other USFS Directors from Research. Reducing the status of the WWSR leader within the USFS would send a very negative message about the importance of this crucial interagency policy body. The Interagency Wild and Scenic River Coordinating Council is also staffed from WWSR providing leadership for inter-agency wild and scenic river efforts.

The importance of natural areas like Wilderness and Wild and Scenic Rivers will only increase as we deal with issues like climate change and habitat preservation. Implementing new Executive Orders on these issues will take key leadership.

Wilderness and Wild and Scenic Rivers would tend to get lost amongst the other pressing demands from the Recreation interest groups and programs that always demand attention, like developed sites and concessionaires, special uses, ski areas, and travel management.

Program Considerations

Wilderness and Wild and Scenic Rivers are much more than just a recreation focus, they encompass all resources and should be managed in an interdisciplinary manner.

Soon, it is expected that new designation efforts for both wilderness and wild and scenic rivers will need leadership, not only for managing new legislation, but the planning challenges that will follow. Current wilderness and wild and scenic river manual direction updates are needed as well to bring policy forward to meet today's challenges.

The continued rise in potential impacts, new technologies, and preservation of wilderness character will necessitate leadership time and energy. Proposed restoration efforts will need scrutiny to ensure wilderness character is maintained. Director leadership can navigate key issues that have tendencies to blow-up, like predator damage management, interactions with fish and wildlife agencies in wilderness, whitebark pine restoration, fish stocking, grazing allotments, aircraft landings, that are not recreation focused but have key legislative policy and historical knowledge requirements.

Ongoing litigation over compliance with wilderness laws and regulations requires a solid leadership presence in the Wilderness/WSR staff to navigate the different laws and policies that apply.

Relationship Considerations

Wilderness and Wild and Scenic Rivers tap an entirely different set of stewardship and advocacy groups than Recreation. The history of shared leadership with managing Wilderness and Wild and Scenic Rivers points to continued need for leadership presence not diffused by recreation focused groups. Partnerships produce a significant amount of field work in wilderness and wild and scenic rivers today and this trend is likely to continue.

A key function of each NFS Director is to be the first point of contact for the CEO's of national environmental groups. For organizations like The Wilderness Society, American Rivers, River Network, River Management Society, Wilderness Land Trust, National Wilderness Stewardship Alliance, Wilderness Watch, Sierra Club, Wilderness International, they want to meet, if not with the Chief or Deputy Chief, at least with a very senior USFS leader: a Wilderness or Wild and Scenic River Director. The relationships the WWSR Director has developed with these groups has kept open important channels of communication which benefit not only these programs but the entire Forest Service.

The future stewardship of these areas will depend on stewardship groups, increased field presence, more science, revitalization of conservation corps efforts, and will require focused leadership.

Budget and Managerial Considerations

At first glance it's not apparent how this move would promote any cost savings since the number of positions would stay the same. At most it might reduce the staff reports to an associate deputy chief by one.

If the current Director is made a Deputy Director or Assistant Director within the Recreation staff it will seem like a demotion for the employee and for the program. The stated reason for considering the move is to create better integration of the programs and less competition for recreation appropriations. However, both Wilderness and Recreation get their funding from the same EBLI. This is not likely to improve funding for wilderness and wild and scenic rivers but to get worse under one Director as they compete against other recreation programs. Historically the agency has focused more on front country issues than backcountry because of more perceived pressing issues.

Because Recreation and WWSR share the same EBLI there will continue to be competition for scarce federal dollars. WWSR should be multi-financed because of the interdisciplinary nature of wilderness work.

Even though Regional Wilderness and WSR Program leaders exist within a Recreation program staff, they operate through the direction of the Wilderness/WSR Director. Coordination between the WO and Regions occurs thru the Recreation Directors. The fall down in this system is usually from a Recreation Director not being engaged or too caught up in other Recreation related issues to spend time on Wilderness and WSR issues or trying to micromanage their staffs.

Political Considerations

President Biden recent Executive Orders declare it is *"the policy of my Administration to lead the Nation's effort to combat the climate crisis by example—specifically, by aligning the management of Federal procurement and real property, public lands and waters, and financial programs to support robust climate action."* Making this change to Wilderness and Wild and Scenic Rivers seems to run counter to emphasizing these areas especially with an Administration favorable to Special Areas.

President Biden also is committed to putting more people to work in the outdoors. *"It is the policy of my Administration to put a new generation of Americans to work conserving our public lands and waters."* *"Creating a Civilian Climate Corps Initiative, within existing appropriations, to mobilize the next generation of conservation and resilience workers and maximize the creation of accessible training opportunities and good jobs. The initiative shall aim to conserve and restore public lands and waters, bolster community resilience, increase reforestation, increase carbon sequestration in the agricultural sector, protect biodiversity, improve access to recreation, and address the changing climate."* Wilderness and Wild and Scenic Rivers have built in jobs for wilderness rangers, river rangers, trail

crews, and conservation tech's that could easily be added with funding. Years of neglect and declining workforces are ripe for increases. A Director can help navigate this program emphasis.

An alternative to consider is adding more Special Area programs to the Wilderness/WSR Directorate (Roadless, National Monuments, National Scenic and Historic Trails) to give it more emphasis and greater leadership role in big issues like climate change, habitat restoration/preservation and other ecosystem services provided by natural areas, while ensuring Congressional Direction for these areas is followed and implemented. As the Administration rolls out participation in the "30 by 30" initiative agency leadership to implement it naturally seems a part of a Wilderness/WSR Director's role.

Major Accomplishments of the Program During the Last Two Decades that would Likely Not have Happened if Wilderness and Wild and Scenic Rivers had remained in the Recreation Staff.

There is increased visibility of the wilderness and wild and scenic rivers programs, including recognition of their contribution to the science of biophysical and human resource management. This has mainly been the result of the Director working directly with the Deputy Chief, budget office, and other NPS program areas to secure funds for Wilderness Character Monitoring, Wilderness Stewardship Challenge, the Wild and Scenic River Coalition, and 50th Anniversary Celebrations. The program staff has grown from roughly four people in 2000 to 12 people today.

An evolving and increasingly successful mentoring and training programs for employees. This has resulted from both the development of topic-related content and increased public outreach efforts. Examples include the 50th Anniversary commemoration of the Wilderness Act and Wild and Scenic Rivers Act; the initiation and growth of the WSR River Training Center; Wilderness Skills Institutes; formation of the saw program certification for employees and partners; train-the-trainer efforts which have leveraged rich expertise and perspectives for interagency and citizen audiences; the IWSRCC website rivers.gov and its valuable products and resources. The creation of the Wilderness Advisory Group (WAG), and Wilderness Information Management Steering Team (WIMST) would not have happened without Director emphasis, resulting in improved products, networking of employees and valuable career training opportunities for many agency employees.

Increased efforts with partners. WSR has created river advocacy partners, notably the formation of and provision of resources to members of the WSR Coalition and Partner Funding with a Challenge Cost Share with River Network. Establishment of the National Wilderness Stewardship Alliance, and its network of stewardship partners accomplishing needed work throughout the wilderness system would not have happened without this Director leadership.

Establishment of the annual Wilderness Workshops to bring together the wilderness community (agencies, partners and academics) to further wilderness policy and science.

Support for continuing interagency Wilderness Steering Committee (WSC) and Interagency Wild and Scenic Rivers Coordinating Council (IWSRCC). These interagency bodies have been incredibly fruitful in preparing policy materials, training, and helping build consistency between the agencies in management of Wilderness and Wild and Scenic Rivers.

Chief's Wilderness Awards provide a platform for recognizing excellence in wilderness stewardship while also building relationships with partners and other agencies. The high profile of these awards have been instrumental in generating agency goodwill.

Program-specific advocacy. Having a WWSR Director meant that outside organizations that have an overall interest in recreation but not specifically Wilderness or Wild and Scenic Rivers (such as IMBA, America Outdoors (outfitters and guides), BCHA, Access Fund, etc. would meet regularly to discuss and negotiate issues and policies with a Director focused specifically on these two programs. There's no question but that this made these groups more sensitive (and responsive) to the special needs of wilderness and WSR [and possibly saved on conflict and litigation costs].

Major policy initiatives like revision of the 2320 Manual, creating a saw policy that included volunteer certification, and planning rule direction for wilderness evaluation and river planning would not have been as successful without Director oversight.