

**USDA – Forest Service AGENCY UPDATE**  
**for the AT New England Regional Partnership Committee**  
**October 24, 2005**

- **Personnel Changes.** *Mike Johanns*, former governor of Nebraska, is now the Secretary of Agriculture, replacing *Ann Veneman*. Nationally, *Joel Holthrop* is now Deputy Chief for the National Forest System, replacing the retired *Tom Thompson*. *Greg Smith* is the recently named national Director of Lands. *Dave Holland*, national Director of Recreation, retired in June to become the Director of Parks and Recreation for San Mateo County, CA. Currently, both the national Director of Recreation and the national Director of Wilderness positions are vacant, with the selection process underway. *Jim Miller*, national Trails Program Manager, retired in September, and his duties have been taken on by *Jonathan Stephens*, who also is responsible for congressionally designated areas. At the Regional level, *John Phipps* is the new Deputy Regional Forester for Natural Resources in the Eastern Region (R9), replacing *Don Meyer*. *Dave Dillard* has replaced *Donna Hepp* as the regional Director of Recreation. *Tracy Tophooven* is the new District Ranger on the North Half of the Green Mountain NF in VT, and *David Harloff* is the new North Zone Trails Manager for the Green Mountain NF. This list is incomplete, partly due to a large number of recent incentive retirements and to ongoing organizational changes.
- **Organizational Changes.** USFS continues to analyze job functions throughout the agency, as part of the government-wide “Competitive Sourcing” initiative, and in order to ultimately improve efficiency and consistency. Business functions, including Financial Management (FM), Human Resources (HR) and Information Resource Management (IRM), have been studied and are being reorganized and centralized, primarily at a new Service Center in Albuquerque, NM. The agency is currently incurring significant short-term costs as business operations are centralized. Study of other job functions will continue.
- **Response to National Emergencies.** The Forest Service has played, and continues to play, a major role in the federal response to Hurricanes Katrina, Rita, and Wilma. Beginning immediately after Katrina made landfall, our Incident Management Teams and wildland fire crews nationwide have been tasked by FEMA with a variety of assignments throughout Mississippi, Alabama, Louisiana, Texas, and Florida. Assignments include establishing and managing support camps and staging areas for responders and emergency supplies; distributing food, water, and ice; and sheltering and feeding evacuees. The incident command system developed to fight wildland fires has been adopted for all national emergency response. At one time in early October, more than 3000 USFS employees were assigned to the hurricane emergencies. That number remains well over 1,200 personnel.
- **Agency Emphasis.** We continue to be driven in our management by the Chief’s FOUR THREATS to the nation’s forests and grasslands: *Fire and Fuels*, *Invasive Species*, *Loss of Open Space (Ecosystem Fragmentation)*, and *Unmanaged Recreation*. As stated in the FY2006 national budget program direction, “The agency’s priority continues to be mitigating the effects of catastrophic wildland fires by changing conditions on the land.”
- **Budget.** The overall USFS budget for Fiscal Year 2006 (which began October 1) has been characterized as “flat” for most program areas nationally, including trails. Notably, land acquisition funding has been cut nationally to less than 70% of last year’s level. Individual

National Forests have not yet received their funding allocations. The current trend of a flat or declining agency budget is expected to continue, and additional cutbacks or rescissions are possible in the current year and beyond.

- **Forest Plan Revisions.** Completion of the Plan Revision process remains a top priority on both the White Mountain and Green Mountain NFs. Personnel from both forests have worked closely with AT management partners – ATC, Clubs, and ATPO – on the management direction for the A.T. in these separate revised plans. Drafts of both plans were released earlier this year for public comment. Following review and analysis of those comments, the release of final Plans is expected in 2006 for each forest.
- **Recent Court Decision.** In mid-September, a U.S. District Court in California issued a ruling with nation-wide implications for the agency. In a case titled “*Earth Island Institute vs. Ruthenbeck*”, the judge ruled that the agency needed to provide for formal public notice, a public comment period, and the opportunity to appeal all project decisions. This includes a large variety of projects, including trail maintenance among many others, which have routinely been authorized under “categorical exclusions” from formal notice, comment, and appeal under the National Environmental Policy Act. The USFS Washington Office has issued direction for Forests to review all recently authorized projects as they work to fully respond to the court decision. This issue has recent significant attention in the media.
- **Agency Centennial.** 2005 marks the 100-year anniversary of the Forest Service as an agency, specifically July 1, 2005. The Forest Service recognized ATC with a national Centennial Award for volunteer leadership at a Centennial Congress in Washington, D.C. last January.
- **Recreation Fees.** In December 2004, Congress passed the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act (REA), authorizing the USFS, and other federal land-managing agencies, to continue the Recreation Fee Demo program for 10 years. Under Fee Demo, fees could be charged a variety of USFS recreation sites, with most revenue collected remaining on the unit where it was collected and used to improve facilities and services. The REA provides for more specific definition of appropriate fee sites, some standardization of fees within and between the agencies, development of a national multi-agency pass system, and development of advisory committees to provide public involvement in determining appropriate fee areas and fees.

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