

TESTIMONY OF

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**OBSERVATIONS ON THE POSSIBLE MOVE OF THE FOREST SERVICE TO THE
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR**

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for inviting me here to testify today. My name is Mike Dombeck. I retired from public service in 2001 and am currently a professor at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point. I served as U.S. Forest Service Chief from 1997 to 2001, and prior to that I served as Acting-Director of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) for three years. I have also held a variety of field and headquarters positions with the Forest Service and BLM and with the Office of the Secretary of the Interior as Acting Assistant Secretary for Lands and Minerals Management. I'm pleased to present testimony on my observations of the possible move of the Forest Service to the Department of the Interior

My testimony is not based on a detailed analysis of organizations but instead on observation and practical experience of first growing up within a national forest with family and neighbors dependent on the public lands and the benefits they provide for their livelihoods, and second, my years of public service.

If we were designing a new organization from scratch today to manage nearly 500 million acres of public lands; I can think of no reason that we would have two agencies with nearly identical land stewardship

missions under different cabinet secretaries, different congressional committees of jurisdiction, reporting to different departments. However, the missions of the Forest Service and BLM are not completely aligned. For example, the BLM has responsibility for subsurface minerals under federal lands while the Forest Service has important research and State and Private Forestry responsibilities that BLM does not. Reasons to consider a merger are obvious.

The Forest Service is too often seen as the odd agency out at USDA. Consider the Forest Service fire borrowing problem of the past five-seven years. The Forest Service is limited to using funds allocated to the agency to fight wildfires. It is forced to pull several hundred million dollars from important programs to fight emergency wildfires causing fiscal chaos. On the other hand, BLM is able to access any un-obligated funds within the whole Department of Interior to fight emergency fires. If secretaries of Agriculture were as concerned about managing forests as they are about farm programs, I believe the Forest Service would have a similar authority as the BLM. Even within the USDA, the Animal, Plant, Health, Inspection Service (APHIS) has the authority to draw funds from the Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC) to help address a declared pest emergency. Why does the Forest Service not have the same authority as its sister-agency to draw from CCC funds in a “declared fire emergency”? In the absence of solutions to the fire-borrowing problem, all Forest Service programs are suffering as money is taken from them to pay for fire response.

One of the obvious benefits of merging the Forest Service into Interior is that the Forest Service would get more attention and likely more political support if its leadership and budget were aligned under the same Department. One of the downsides of such an approach is that the different cultures and customs of the Forest Service and BLM have the very real potential of clashing, resulting in bureaucratic delays and low employee morale. The Forest Service organization is patterned on somewhat of a military model. The discipline and strong “line-leadership” allow the agency to withstand political swings and shifts. The downside of this culture is that it can lead to insularity, resistance to change and new ideas, where “outsiders” and new ideas are often resisted.

The BLM, on the other hand, has a much less rigid culture that better facilitates coordination with local communities, ranchers, and other user groups. A downside of BLM’s flexibility is that it has been subject to broad pendulum swings motivated by politics. Witness the Bush Administration’s dramatic acceleration of oil and gas development on public lands and its harmful consequences to water, fish and wildlife. It is vital that BLM leads the way in demonstrating techniques that allow for the production of energy resources in a way that doesn’t harm fish, wildlife, and water resources.

For almost 20 years, since the end of the big timber era in 1989, the Forest Service has been in a period of transition. Climate change and the profound importance of national forests as a source of fish and wildlife habitat and drinking water make it vital that the agency emerge from this transition and lead the nation in developing climate change adaptation and mitigation strategies.

I believe both agencies, like most long established organizations public or private, share a strong resistance to major organizational change. In addition, their traditional constituencies will generally not be supportive of major change. One of the most common sense proposals for closer alignment between the Forest Service and BLM was the land “Interchange” proposed during the Reagan Administration. The interchange proposal would have allowed for the exchange of approximately 24 million acres of land between the BLM and the Forest Service. It would have consolidated intermingled lands with the BLM

getting rangelands and Forest Service receiving forested lands, resulting in more effective and efficient management. The proposal failed largely because of traditions, cultures and constituencies of both agencies that were resistant to change.

Recently, the Forest Service has gone through major administrative reorganizations that have resulted in significant internal stress; yet, despite these changes, the agency has only tinkered around the edges of the organizational modernization that needs to occur. The core business model of the Forest Service remains rooted in the big timber harvest era where timber receipts were, in part, funneled into trust funds like K-V that paid the majority of the bills. That era is over. Fire funding issues and road maintenance problems are prime examples of the big timber era hang-over resulting in much inefficiency. I cannot recall a single employee telling me they felt good about the level of Forest Service efficiency. In fact, most are very concerned with how expensive the bureaucracy is and how little money actually gets to the ground. Is the traditional four tier organization needed with 21st century technologies? We all know that change it tough, especially for entrenched cultures and bureaucracies. “The misery of uncertainty is worse than the certainty of misery.”

While I can't conclude that moving the Forest Service to Interior should never be done, I'm skeptical that the benefits would exceed the costs at this time. The priorities facing the two agencies are too serious right now to spend the years it would take to merge them and achieve a significant increase in level of efficiency. BLM must completely overhaul its oil and gas development program and science needs to drive its administrative decisions. Special places, wildlife corridors, open space, and water quality must be protected. We need landowner assistance in addition to research and effective land management of national forests in order to model climate change mitigation and adaptation strategies and position the Forest Service as the leader for the rest of the world. The restoration of public lands is a local jobs program waiting to happen.

That said, I do believe that many things can and should be done to improve and modernize the operation of the both the Forest Service and BLM. From a taxpayers or citizen point of view: Should the Forest Service and BLM planning process differ in the same state? Should the permitting processes be different for the same constituencies? Should agencies have different local hiring practices in the same community? Should land resource maps and databases be different for federal lands in the same county? Should procedures for local contractors be different in the same town? Should tourists have to go to different offices for maps or information about recreation opportunities in the same locale?

I suspect we agree on the answers to these few examples. Congress and the Administration should remove the impediments in order to align the agencies' processes and services. These alignments make sense and will add efficiency no matter what Department they are in. If the Forest Service cannot solve its fire-borrowing problems, if the BLM continues with poorly designed oil and gas lease sales and if the Forest Service cannot use the climate change threat to emerge from its long period of transition, then it may be time to start over. The real drivers of reorganizations should be better land stewardship and improved public service.

Let me conclude with a story. In 1996, when I was BLM Director and Dr. Jack Ward Thomas was Forest Service Chief, we approved the Service First Initiative, starting with a pilot in Colorado. The Service First Initiative was designed to provide better customer service by providing one-stop shopping for permits, tourists and the public by co-locating Forest Service and BLM offices and co-management of

federal lands to reduce agency overlap and increase efficiency. When I traveled to the San Luis Valley to kick off Service First, it was a big deal to the agency employees, many of whom were very skeptical. Obviously, it wasn't business as usual. When I met with the local constituencies and the Resource Advisory Council they saw this as a no-brainer and wondered why we hadn't been operating like this all along. I'm not suggesting that every aspect of the Service First initiative has worked; rather I mention it as just one example of several experiments to increase efficiency for the agencies and delivery of services. The Forest Service and BLM together have well over one hundred and fifty years of experience of what works and what doesn't. The challenge is to do what works best and get rid of what doesn't.

If there is any validity to "form follows function," aligning function of the nation's two largest land management agencies should result in a model of service, conservation and land stewardships. However, if the processes, procedures and public services aren't aligned and modernized, it probably doesn't matter where the Forest Service is moved or how the puzzle pieces are rearranged. I recommend that the Congress and Administration move quickly and remove barriers and align the services, policies and procedures of the Forest Service and BLM. What building the Forest Service Chief and BLM Director sit in is less important than how the two agencies deliver services to communities and maintain the long-term health of the land.