

## The Quest for Respect

Remarks to the Combined Wildland Fire Apprenticeship Academy Classes  
8 February 2008  
Sacramento, California

I'm glad to be here in Sacramento with you. Because there are such good folks in Fire and Aviation Management back at HQ, I'm able to be here. I'm pleased to be able to talk to future leaders of wildland fire and aviation management and to the teachers who've nurtured and tutored you during this academy. Coming to speak to you causes me to be reflective because I see such youth in front of me. It's hard to believe, but I was young once too! I'm not young anymore but I continue to be excited about the work we do in wildland fire. I'm extraordinarily proud to be your USFS Fire Director. When I was your age I never ever thought I would have this job. Together we have much we need to share and much we need to do. Today, I'll talk, you'll listen, and then we'll see what "doing" comes out of this. I want to talk to you about some fundamentals in your quest for respect.

There is much I could talk about; I know you are concerned about the bad news you hear. Bad news makes headlines. I've heard that many of you are worried about the future. I can understand why. There are a variety of things to trouble you. Despite best intentions, the reinvention of USFS business operations sure hasn't gone as well as planned. Our Deputy Chief for Business Operations has been honest with you about this. I know there are many vacancies on your Ranger Districts in fire and you worry about a lack of module level leadership. As you think of your future, many of you are dealing with changing 401 standards and worried about IFPM. You also have certainly been reading about the USFS transformation effort and are wondering where that will take us. Figuring out where the fuels program ends up is of great interest. The Presidents FY09 budget has just been released and you may be wondering what those numbers mean. You've sent me messages about a Regional Forester decision to restrict the collar brass and working titles many of you have become accustomed to, and recently word was widely distributed about restrictions on Code 3 driving which were confusing. Inside the agency, and touted by the press, there are reported significant budget tensions between fire and non-fire programs. It probably seems like just one piece of bad news after another.

But in my mind, "bad news", while garnering today's headlines, does NOT encapsulate the truth of the future.

As I begin, I think I need to remind you about some fundamental truths about the organization in which we labor. Our USFS world is one in which line officers make the decisions about the organization. Every organization has those line officers, those final decision makers. County Fire Chiefs work for County Executives. Here in California, CALFIRE Chief Ruben Grijalva works for the Governor. Our Chief has the confidence of the Presidents Secretary of Agriculture and she leads the entire USFS. She allows Regional Foresters considerable discretion in the leadership of their Regions. We in fire and aviation management are staff to those line officers. Currently, in our organization, there are many line officers who feel that we in fire don't listen, that we set our own direction, and that we do not respect the line officers for whom we work.

You may not feel respected, but many line officers would feel the same. I would also mention that our Fire LOT team, lead by R-4 Deputy Regional Forester Mary Wagner, as well as an effort by a respected consultant, Dialogos, are working on maintaining and improving the line and fire interchange.

In fire and aviation management, we organizationally reside in a world of USFS hierarchy, and frequently work in a world outside the USFS. Interagency coordination and cooperation is fundamental to who we are. We are praised for our seamless work with federal, state, and local agencies. Many times we feel greater kinship with those outside the agency, and inside our networks, than those inside our hierarchy. We may value the network more than the hierarchy. Given the significant common experiences, sometimes life changing experiences, we share with those in wildland fire and aviation management and emergency services it is understandable. Who could walk the grounds of 9/11 at the World Trade Center or Pentagon, or work in New Orleans after Katrina or work on the Rodeo-Chediski fire and not be changed?

But I don't want to talk today about the issues associated with budget or organizational relationships. I acknowledge them, but will not dwell on them today. I want to talk about the future and about respect. I refuse to cast 10,000 fire and aviation individuals as victims. How can we be victims when fire has an increasing portion of the USFS budget? I will not allow us to be cast as "whiners and complainers". How can we be "whiners and complainers" when you are periodically showered with praise from the public because of your efforts?

And so let me share some thoughts about three things which might interest you, (1) mission, (2) pay, and (3) ethos. In discussing these three items, I hope to take us through things sublime and trivial. I hope these are things you want to hear about, because it's what I'm speaking to today.

Let me first speak to our mission. I've outlined the wildland fire management world I see in the next couple decades. If you are interested, read what I told the folks at the Brookings Institution helping us with the Quadrennial Fire Review a few months ago. But in a nutshell, in a nation, public lands, and national forest system which will become increasingly more flammable and challenging, our federal wildland fire mission will end up bracketed in between the "wilderness" (which is almost exclusively federal and USFS) and the suburbs which are not. The suburbs are expensive to do fire management work in, the "wilderness" less so. Many of the folks we work for now think we do too much in the suburbs and their associated interface and not enough in the "wilderness". There is little doubt that in the context of current agency budgets and constraints we cost too much and the effect of that growing fire portion of the budget is adverse to a multitude of natural resource management programs, including fuels. Many in our organization are neither sure of our land ethic, nor certain where our loyalties lie. In this context, with state and local partners who may have a very different perspective of critical objectives, our mission will be more clearly defined in the future. It must be. It is time to more fully describe national wildland fire policy so roles and responsibilities can be more clearly articulated, commanders intent specified, doctrine articulated, and the public, which we serve, satisfied that we are being wise and thoughtful, effective and efficient, protectors and stewards.

Lofty stuff, but I don't want to dodge the pay issue with you. I spoke first to mission, because your pay will be determined by the skills the public requires of you. As GS-4's and 5's, you are

probably more interested in pay, so let me speak a little to the issue. In the federal wildland fire service, we will never pay what Chief Freeman can pay his folks in the LA County Fire Department. I don't believe we will ever pay the same as our friends in CALFIRE. We are not a traditional municipal fire department. We are not a statewide fire department like CALFIRE. We will not develop ALS (Advanced Life Support) capability. We will not develop full scale hazmat or urban search and rescue capability. We are wildland fire professionals. We bridge a niche between natural resource management and the emergency services folks expect from organizations like the LA City Fire Department. We are an organization closely affiliated with both emergencies and forests. Our foundation lies in the land. We work predominantly in the wildlands, whether those wildlands are those just above Monrovia or deep in the Selway-Bitterroot. While closely allied, we are not the same as our dear friends in blue. We won't be paid the same. I must remind you that in most places in this nation we, the federal wildland fire professional, are either at parity or more highly paid than our state, county, or local counterpart. If your objective is to become wealthy, you've chosen the wrong profession and the wrong employer. If your objective is to have a fruitful, wonderful career, like I'm having, in a job which, in most places, pays sufficient for your needs, you've come to the right place. That said I know there is a pay disparity problem in southern California, northern California and other places across the country. We are working to help fix at least part of the problem. Our USFS Chief would like to narrow the pay gaps, where they exist, with comparable jobs. Finally, if you give this work a chance, here with us, and let us work to close at least part of the gap between ourselves and our cooperators, I'm confident you'll stay with us.

Let me finish with some thoughts about what is most important over the long run, our ethos, our ethics, who we are, who I want you to become, deep inside. Over the years, ethos - our spirit, is critically formative of our profession. We will be judged by our actions. I believe thoughts form actions and ethics form thoughts.

I want us to be professionals; I'd like to see us more formally recognized as such. From my little corner of the world, I have the same opinion I had twenty years ago. I'd like to see us have a wildland fire manager series, just as landscape architects and wildlife biologists, and rangeland managers do, in order to be recognized for our work. Line officers above us may have very good reasons for not doing that, it hasn't happened in the twenty years I've thought it was a good idea. Even if the USFS Chief decided this was something she wanted to do, she would have to convince the Federal Government Office of Personnel Management. This is not a simple, or easy, task. Still, I want us known as professionals in wildland fire. While a wildland fire management series would be nice, our work and our profession will more broadly define us with the public.

Speaking of the public, we are among the most trusted of public servants because of the emergency wildland fire work and natural resource wildland fire work we do. Our integrity, and the trust it engenders from the public, is a virtue we must guard religiously.

We must be altruistic servants of those we serve, line and the public, as well as one another. Judging someone by their gender or race, or engaging in disgusting behaviors, has no place with altruistic servants. While we can disagree, we can not be disagreeable. Respectful interaction is the way we deal with one another and those around us.

We must be thinkers and innovators, willing to be our own toughest critics. Intellectual fat has no place in our profession. We'll NOT lead by preponderance of rules, but with our minds. We'll become the nation's civilian leaders in applying risk management principles. We must lead the way with doctrine.

These qualities enable us to be quietly competent. There is no reason for us to be seen as thumping our chest, nor taking credit for the sun rising in the morning. I do not believe in self-aggrandizement.

These virtues enable us in fire and aviation management to develop and maintain an esprit de Corps. We share this spirit across federal agencies, within the USFS, and with the state and local partners who are invaluable in our incomparable work. Sharing is extraordinarily important.

There is something key I need to express and make clear about the interaction of line and fire in the areas I've talked about in mission pay and ethos. While she expects me to give her my recommendations and thoughts, the Chief will make the determination about our mission. The Chief will determine policies which affect our pay. She'll listen carefully and then decide. She'll not ask for a vote from USFS employees and cooperators. She will do what she considers in the best interest of the entire USFS. On the issue of our ethos though, while she will help, it is "We", you and I, who will determine and shape our ethos.

Much has changed in the 38 years since my first fire on the Groveland Ranger District of the Stanislaus National Forest. But looking 38 years into the future I can assure you that there will be a federal wildland fire program. It will look different than today. I can even assure you that it will be a wonderful place to work. I know you need to care for your families, and I'll do all I can to help you do that, but don't count on being wealthy because of this career choice. By the way, I must mention that my memories of sunrises and sunsets while in woods have made me a much richer person.

There is no doubt that you will be the ones who will shape the fire and aviation management program thirty years from today. You will build, good or bad, on things folks like me have left for you. Only history will determine how forward thinking, or how provincial, the decisions of today have been.

You will search for respect and I'm confident you can find it. You will learn to lead and you'll have a greater appreciation for just how satisfying it is to earn respect. You'll have a greater appreciation for the fact that no one "white knight" will ride in to save you, nor should you ever hope for one, it's not the American way. You'll learn to find strength and satisfaction in working together. You will feel those feelings I've felt as I've had the opportunity to be recognized because of folks like you, boots on the ground. You'll feel the satisfaction of a job well done.

So, my young friends, this is a start, use it as such. Find some time to think what this old man has told you; let me know your reactions. Find those among you who adopt those ethical qualities I've spoken of, and who look forward to leadership responsibilities at the highest levels of the organization. Nurture them and yourselves. Listen to the darkness and problems and the

bad news, but lightly. Help us find solutions. Look forward to the satisfaction of sunrises which make you proud. Never let the darkness envelop you and never, never, never give up your quest for respect, both personal and professional, in this wildland fire management work you have chosen.