

## Ag Department effort aimed at more diversity

By Michael Doyle  
Bee Washington Bureau

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WASHINGTON -- A lifetime ago, Jim Oftedal says, he was a hood in the woods.

Now, the streetwise and ponytailed 44-year-old from Fresno is trying to get others to follow in his boot steps. It's one way, he believes, that the Agriculture Department can improve its record of employing minorities.

"We've lacked diversity; Hispanics and other minorities are not well-represented," Oftedal told an audience at Agriculture Department headquarters Tuesday. "We knew that if we were going to diversify the work force, that now was the time."

Forty percent of Oftedal's fellow Forest Service workers are slated to retire within the next 10 years, he noted. He considers this the perfect opportunity to start changing the complexion of an agency in which 83% of workers are white.

Nor is the Forest Service unique, although with about 5,000 employees in California alone, it is the largest single agency within the Agriculture Department.

Nationwide, an estimated 12.5% of U.S. residents are Hispanic. With the exception of the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (9.4% Hispanic work force), no Agriculture Department entity comes close to this. About 3.6% of Farm Service Agency employees are Hispanics, for instance, while 82.5% are white.

"I agree that we must ensure that as Hispanics that we're better-represented," said Elsa Murano, undersecretary of agriculture for food safety and co-chairwoman of the department's Hispanic Advisory Council. "I think we all know we can do better."

This is where the Clovis-based Central California Consortium comes in.

Begun by Oftedal in Orange Cove eight years ago, the Forest Service program is a blend of job training, environmental education and quite a bit more. It targets the Valley's Hmong, Hispanic and black youths, partly in the hope of drawing some into full-time federal jobs.

Oftedal's work has gained increasing national attention. This week, that included Oftedal delivering the keynote address at a Hispanic Heritage Month Celebration convened within Agriculture Department headquarters.

"The students I'm working with are from some of the poorest communities in America," Oftedal told the audience.

The consortium has placed about 450 students in summer internships and 50 others into career positions.

Oftedal, an enthusiastic promoter of his program, noted he has much in common with the students he's targeting.

"I was born and raised on the mean streets of southeast Fresno," Oftedal said. Then, 23 years ago, he was hired to work on the Sierra National Forest. When he subsequently visited the forest with his friends, "people referred to us as hoods in the woods. But we didn't let that stop us."

Oftedal's work taps into a long-running vulnerability of the Agriculture Department, as civil-rights activists have long criticized the department for its treatment of minority employees and farmers.

Department officials have in turn tried repeatedly to correct acknowledged shortcomings. These include some within the department's own Office of Civil Rights, where by 2001, discrimination complaints were taking an average of 676 days to resolve.

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"Severe morale problems and poor working relationships among staff have exacerbated these problems and hindered [the civil rights office's] ability to significantly improve its complaint processing times," the Government Accountability Office noted in a 2002 audit.

The reporter can be reached at [mdoyle@mcclatchydc.com](mailto:mdoyle@mcclatchydc.com) or (202) 383-0006.

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