
Director's Update: May You Live in Interesting Times

—Vaughn Stokes, director of engineering, Washington Office

This will be our last electronic version of *Engineering Field Notes*. Sadly, as budget impacts affect all of us, we must say goodbye to this periodical.

An often-quoted proverb, “May you live in interesting times,” certainly rings true for the times we find ourselves in today. I am not sure if this is a blessing or a curse. Some “interesting” challenges of today, and in the foreseeable future, are declining budgets, an aging and reduced workforce, increased demand on our infrastructure and capital assets, better accountability, and more performance measures for improved efficiency and effectiveness in our programs.

In these times, more than ever, the role and mission of engineering is integral to the success of the Forest Service. Engineering will continue to be a “go-to” organization within the Forest Service that provides high-quality technical services to all functional areas of the organization. A successful engineering organization needs to be flexible so it can adapt to an ever-changing, dynamic world.

Engineering’s collective strengths reflect the consistent high-quality performance of our workforce, our dedication to the agency’s purpose and mission, and the unique talents that each individual brings to the team. To maintain and enhance our abilities to provide world-class technical service and assistance, our contribution to the organization must be clear and well understood. Attracting and retaining a talented and diverse workforce that consistently functions at optimum performance levels is paramount to successfully meeting our challenges.

I am confident in our ability to build on our strengths and look forward to a Government that performs better and better, encourages more participatory management and open communication, and ultimately reduces barriers and expands opportunities. As I look toward fiscal year 2006 and beyond, I recognize that nothing remains constant and that change is essential to improvement. The collective strength of the engineering staff, the excellent core competencies of each individual, and our ability to articulate engineering’s contribution to the Forest Service and the Federal Government will help us meet these challenges and exceed expectations.

We can be proud of some significant accomplishments in furthering two pieces of legislation by clearly articulating engineering’s role to Congress. We did not achieve all of our goals, but we were successful in getting pivotal basic legislation passed and in getting additional authorizations in the appropriations bill. These vital tools will enable us to keep moving our programs of work forward.

A top priority has been to position the Forest Service to use tools and funding offered in the Transportation Bill effectively. Although we did not get the Recreation Roads category that we sought, several other desirable items are in the bill. We now have an *Aquatic Organism Passage* category for Public Forest Service Roads; we can compete with other Federal agencies for funding in alternative transportation modes and high-risk rural roads, and our forest highway funds are slated to increase substantially over the life of the Transportation Bill.

New legislation for managing facilities provides two tools for the Forest Service, authorizing a permanent conveyance authority and use of the funds from the sale of properties to maintain existing structures or construct new structures. Although we did not gain Working Capital Fund authority, we did receive authorization for a new Expanded Budget Line Item (EBLI) to cover the cost of buildings and administrative facilities. The new EBLI will be funded from other appropriations and will be managed similar to a cost-pool account. It will retain the incentives to shed excess properties. These successes do come with some costs—Congress will impose targets to reduce our deferred maintenance on facilities by 25 percent by 2010.

Working with Congress on this pivotal legislation has helped members recognize our programs of work and better realize the needs we have. Discussions to inform members of Congress about the engineering program have generated support for the Forest Service and the mission of engineering. Members of Congress now recognize that a support network of roads and facilities is necessary to implement the on-the-ground work for healthy forests. This knowledge will help us in the future.

I want to remind all of you that your number-one job is to be safe in your work and personal lives. All of you are vital members of the workforce, your families, and the communities in which you live. Please take the extra time you need to be safe when you complete all tasks, jobs, or even short trips to the grocery store.

Although this will be the last edition of *Engineering Field Notes*, I will use our Washington Office engineering Web page to keep you informed about issues that will affect you. Take care and be **SAFE!**