WASHINGTON, – The Organization of Professional Employees of USDA has honored two members of the U.S. Forest Service as Unsung Heroes for demonstrating a high level of service to the public through their heroic efforts.

Stephen Forkel, a pilot with the U.S. Forest Service’s Pacific Southwest region, and law enforcement officer Eduardo Cartaya, from the agency’s Pacific Northwest region, were recognized at an event held at the USDA’s headquarters on May 14.

Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack spoke before the awards were presented to the two men, characterizing the honorees as “excellent representatives of the 100,000 USDA employees.”

Forkel, a former Marine aviator, a 1991 graduate of the Naval Academy, a former Aloha Airlines Boeing 737 captain and a certified flight instructor on several aircraft types, flies with a biologist four hours per day up to six days per week tracking the endangered Pacific Fisher.

“The hours are long and the terrain hostile, yet he does his job with a great deal of skill and enthusiasm as he has done for over two years,” said his supervisor, John Litton.

“On a day in March of this year, while flying a routine mission, his aircraft had a partial engine failure over extremely treacherous terrain in the Sierra Nevada Mountains,” Litton continued as he explained why he nominated Forkel for the award.

“Steve was able to locate two potential landing sites previously scouted by him for this contingency. His skill in coaxing the last bit of power out of the single-engine Piper Cub allowed him make an emergency landing on a hillside without damage to the aircraft or injury to himself or his passenger. The following day, the aircraft was repaired and Steve flew it back to the home base.”

Cartaya serves on the Deschutes National Forest in Oregon. The son of Cuban parents, Officer Cartaya is a graduate of West Point, an accomplished concert pianist, a certified arborist and has written scholarly articles for publication.

Last year Cartaya was involved in a number of incidents which demonstrated his dedication to his job and the public.

In January 2011, he worked with a fellow officer access a very remote area by snowmobile to provide aid to an injured man who was suffering from a potential skull fracture and was vomiting blood. As an EMT, Cartaya re-warmed the victim and administered first aid. The two subsequently landed a helicopter to evacuate the injured victim, likely saving his life.

Later in the month, after independently developing new evidence and leads, Officer Cartaya and others conducted an interview which resulted in the recovery of numerous priceless lavacicles taken from a cave on the forest. This action closed a case which began in 1960.

In June 2011, two months after a cave on the forest had been vandalized, Cartaya identified and interviewed five suspects and gained confessions from all of them leading a grand jury to an indictment and charges of those involved.

In August of 2011, Cartaya responded to a truck turned on its side which had trapped the driver while fuel poured onto him. He cut the driver’s seatbelt and extricated him from the vehicle and rendered first aid.

“Although Eddie is relatively new to the agency, he has proven himself to be an invaluable asset to the Forest Service. He has in-exhaustible energy, and a great work ethic. He brings tremendous technical skills to the agency, and is a natural leader. Eddie is the future of the agency, and I look forward to many years of working with him,” said Daniel Smith, Cartaya’s supervisor.

The mission of the Forest Service is to sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of the nation’s forests and grasslands to meet the needs of present and future generations. Recreational activities on National Forest System land contribute $14.5 billion annually to the U.S. economy. The agency manages 193 million acres of public land, provides assistance to state and private landowners, and maintains the largest forestry research organization in the world.

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