

Forest Service-NFFE Collaboration in Fire and Aviation

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Intro to the FS Bargaining Unit

- The NFFE-FSC has a consolidated bargaining unit with approximately 80 Locals nationwide with one Master Agreement that applies to all
 - Forests and Regional Offices
 - Research Stations
 - Civilian Conservation Centers
 - Law Enforcement
 - Administrative offices
- 15,700 bargaining unit employees in the winter; 21,000 in the summer. Many of the 5,000 additional summer employees are fire temporary and permanent seasonal.
- Employees performing fire-related duties are in almost every single Local.
- There are several AFGE and one NAGE Local in the FS.



Intro to Firefighting in the FS

- Fire and Aviation Management (FAM) develops policy and direction at the national level for Forest Service.
- Firefighting and other emergency response activities are cooperative efforts with other federal, state, tribal, and private entities.
- Firefighting and aviation operations are conducted by field units led and supervised by field management.
- Firefighting workforce consists of the fire workforce and "militia."
- In addition to direct firefighting, fire-related duties include admin support such as IT, purchasing, public affairs, and HRM.
- Employees engaged in firefighting and support may come from all parts of the Agency to serve in the militia.



Collaboration between FAM and NFFE

- Forest Service Partnership Council (FSPC) was first established in 1990's under Clinton Executive Order
- Continued with FSPC during the Bush and Obama administrations
- Historically, many fire-related topics came to the FSPC for discussion and union input:
 - "Professionalization" of the fire workforce (transition to GS-401 and other requirements)
 - Medical standards
 - Physical fitness for fire fighters
 - Hiring issues related to fire
 - Hazard Pay for employees on the fire line
- Often the FSPC set up work groups or assigned someone to work on an Agency work group



Changes... 2010-2014

- In late 2000's, Forest Service Information Services, Human Resources Management, and Budget and Finance were centralized, largely in Albuquerque.
- Centralization created organizational and physical separation between administrative advisors and line/program management.
- Many, many changes coming from OPM and USDA.
- Obama Executive Order focus on pre-decisional involvement and demonstrating success of labor-management collaboration.
- The FSPC struggled with its role in PDI and the Executive Order, and connections between program management and the FSPC were weakened.



Forest Service PDI Process

- Forest Service Partnership Council
- Pre-decisional involvement outside of PC
 - Letter from Agency inviting PDI
 - Designation of Agency POC for PDI
 - Response date identified
 - Union responds with Union rep(s) to provide PDI
 - Depending on topic outcome may be:
 - Issue ends with an email saying all issues were resolved.
 - A formal MOU is signed.
 - Issue (part or all) is referred to formal negotiations.



Confusion over PDI

- When the Union raised a concern about receiving a draft policy that had been completed 5 months previously:
- "We did not submit a final draft for review until December 2013 because we were still working on the final management review of the draft revision. I was not comfortable sending out a version that was not supported by leadership. If that's not the way the Union wants this I think we will have a continuous stumbling block with our revision process because I will not send out drafts for review without management concurrence."



In contrast....



Fire and Aviation Collaboration

- Collaboration between Union and Agency is essential:
 - Fire fighting is a uniquely hazardous activity.
 - Medical and physical qualifications are needed to ensure people can perform the work.
 - Training is a mix of classroom and hands-on formal training and involves a heavy Agency investment in individuals.
 - National Wildfire Coordinating Group (NWCG) Courses
 - Formal DOL-approved apprentice program jointly sponsored by NFFE and the Forest Service
 - “Task books” demonstrating skills needed to be qualified for positions.
 - Experienced people doing the work are often best situated to provide input on needed changes.



FAM-NFFE Collaboration

- What works for us:
 - Union involvement early in decision-making process, often at the point where it is just clear that a change needs to be made.
 - Relationship directly between FAM leadership and the NFFE-FSC Fire Committee Chairperson Joe Duran as well as other NFFE representatives
 - Regular email and conference call contact to stay abreast of issues.
 - Union representatives assigned to work on new and modified directives from early in the process.
 - Formal negotiations when needed
 - Recognition of the Union's unique role in legislative matters



Example: IFPM and FS-FPM

- **Interagency Fire Program Management (IFPM) - Qualifications Standards and Guide**
- Following the South Canyon Fire in 1994 in which 14 firefighters were killed on Storm King Mountain, an interagency team was formed to establish fire management qualifications standards to improve firefighter safety and increase professionalism in fire management programs.
- In 2004, IFPM established formal qualifications, including a transition to the GS-401 series (Natural Resources and Biological Science) for some positions, as well as specific experience and training.
- Employees not meeting the minimum qualifications for their current position were to be given 3 years to get the needed training, education, and experience.



Example: IFPM and FSFPM (cont'd)

- 2004-2010 FSPC was informed of the issue and reviewed progress, and implementation was slowed to allow employees to get needed qualifications.
- Upon reaching full implementation date in 2010, we still found:
 - Significant number of individuals who had the skills and knowledge for administrative positions fire management were not going to meet the GS-401 minimum education requirements.
 - Agency was unable to fill critical vacancies while experienced employees saw their career development capped.
- In October 2011, NFFE, FAM, and Human Resources met to develop a solution to this issue.
- Thereafter, all fire management positions at the GS-09 and above grade levels that were primarily administrative and managerial in nature were reclassified in the GS-0301, Miscellaneous Administration and Program Series, removing the requirement for a bachelor's degree or equivalent.



Example: Fire and safety boots



- Forest Service work requires specialized footwear
- Fire boots cost \$300 - \$500
- Long-standing tension about whether the boots were safety equipment or just what employees needed to show up in.
- Union and FAM worked together to develop a policy to reimburse firefighters for the cost of fire boots, and they drafted a Memorandum of Understanding.
- Agency leadership did not agree with the policy. And it turned out the FAM manager had not been delegated the authority to negotiate.
- Formal negotiations ensued, and final policy includes both fire and other boots with a limit of \$300/3 years.

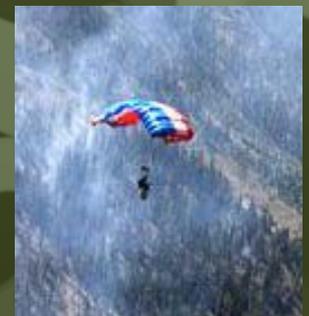
Example: WFAP for all fire hires

- Chief Tidwell issued national policy that all permanent new fire hires were going to be hired through the Wildland Fire Apprentice Program (WFAP) Academy to ensure consistent training for all new FF.
- Union notified the Agency of their intent to file an unfair labor practice over this change.
- Working group established to address concerns with the change in policy. Union concerns included:
 - Temporary employees who had gained needed training during their temporary time
 - Issues related to budget because WFAP is in California, especially travel for employees from other areas.
- Issue is still not resolved, and may need to go to formal negotiations.



Example: Smokejumper Program

- Forest Service uses a round parachute system
 - Good safety record
 - Good in steep, wooded terrain
 - Challenges with wind and maneuverability
- Ram Air chutes are used by other agencies
 - RAM chutes provide more maneuverability
 - Softer landings
 - More modern
- Union and Agency leadership are working to determine what is best for the future of the smoke jumping program, while balancing safety and program needs.



Example: Fire Careers and Family

- Firefighting takes people away from home for long periods of time and requires significant on-call and overtime periods.
- Effort to address specific challenges of employees with family responsibilities.
- Task group has been started and 4 Union representatives have been providing input to this effort.
- Options being discussed include:
 - job sharing
 - working part time
 - working full time, forty-hour weeks with NO overtime as a guarantee.
 - allowing a scheduled number of days in a week or periods during their tour when there will be no expectation for after-hours fire response, no overtime.



Other FAM-NFFE collaboration

- Medical Qualifications (again)
- Physical Fitness Standards (again)
- Interagency Qualifications Handbook (annual review)
- Random drug testing for all permanent firefighters
- National Rappel Operations Guide
- Interagency Aerial Supervision Guide
- Transportation of injured employees and provision of emergency medical care
- Drug testing for militia who hold commercial drivers licenses
- Bargaining unit status of fire supervisors



Challenges

- Lull in union-management activity and changes in players and lots of program areas within FAM -- Not all are familiar with working with NFFE.
- National and Regional activity and initiatives related to fire. Policy is national; operations are more regional/local.
- Must have clear delegation of authority for issues (FAM director does not have negotiations authority unless delegated by the Chief/Deputy Chief).
- Interagency nature of fire suppression.
 - NIFC – <http://www.nifc.gov/>
 - NWCG - <http://www.nwcg.gov/> Union is not on the NWCG and the Forest Service is only 1 of 10 organizations represented.



Keys to success

- Frequent and regular communication
- Inclusion of Union on key mailing lists and leadership groups
- Building relationships with periodic face-to-face meetings (i.e. not everything can be done on the phone, VTC, or email)
- Clear process for entering into PDI outside of the Partnership Council
- Recognition that not everything can be resolved through PDI
- Respect for the knowledge of the people doing the work



And, we never forget the bottom line...
20 years ago this month
Storm King – July 6, 1994

Storm King 14 firefighters



Acronyms

- AFGE – American Federation of Government Employees
- FAM – Fire and Aviation Management
- FSC – Forest Service Council (union)
- FSPC – Forest Service Partnership Council
- IFPM – Interagency Fire Program Management
- NAGE – National Association of Government Employees
- WFAP - Wildland Fire Apprentice Program (WFAP)
- NFFE – National Federation of Federal Employees
- NIFC – National Interagency Fire Center
- NWCG - National Wildfire Coordinating Group

