

USDA, Forest Service
Attn: Vickie Christiansen, Chief
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20250

November 9, 2018

OPEN LETTER TO FOREST SERVICE CHIEF VICKIE CHRISTIANSEN

Dear Chief Christiansen:

We are current and former employees of the USDA, Forest Service. In the past, and recently, senior officers of the USDA Coalition of Minority Employees (Ron Cotton, Lesa Donnelly, Lawrence Lucas) wrote letters to the Secretaries of Agriculture and Forest Service Chiefs describing incidents of discrimination, harassment, and retaliation against female employees in the Forest Service. They requested action to change the culture of work environment abuse, and asked to work in collaboration with USDA and the Forest Service to address those issues. The agency would not respond. We women continued to be discriminated against, harassed, endured sexual and physical abuse, and experienced retaliation. The Coalition had no choice but to seek congressional hearings and contact news media, radio media, and television media to expose the serious issues of discrimination, harassment, and workplace violence against female employees. Despite the concerns of congress and the public exposure, the USDA and the Forest Service continue to ignore our complaints and continue this culture of abuse. We decided it is time for you to hear *our* voices.

The undersigned are women who have worked for the Forest Service for as little as three years and more than twenty-five years. We work in timber, law enforcement, fire, recreation, engineering, ecosystems management, IT, human resources, contracting, research, and administrative positions. We are archaeologists, air quality specialists, foresters, water quality specialists, soil specialists, and wildlife, plant, and fish biologists. We are NEPA planners and fuels planners. We are non-supervisory, union members, union officials, supervisors, staff officers, and managers. We are a variety of GS grades and are located from the west coast to the east coast. We are a cross section of age, race,

ethnicity, national origin, religion, abilities, family affiliations, political affiliations, and sexual orientation. Some of us are former employees because we were fired, forced to resign, or compelled to take early retirement. Some of us left our long term, career positions because the harassment made us too sick to work.

One thing we have in common: we have always taken our job of caring for the land and serving the people seriously. We deserve to be treated with respect, dignity, and given equal opportunities. But your staffs insured that we are isolated, shunned, ignored, treated as unwelcome and unwanted, set up for failure, and deemed unworthy of our jobs.

Some of us were hopeful when Denice Rice and Lesa Donnelly testified before the Committee on Oversight and Government Reform on December 1, 2016. We watched Congressman Chaffetz, Congressman Cummings, Congressman Gowdy, Congresswoman Speier, and others tell Deputy Chief Lenise Lago and Assistant Secretary Joe Leonard that they did not believe their “data” and told them to fix the problems of gender discrimination and sexual harassment. We hoped the agency would take action. But no there were no positive changes to the work environment. We continued to speak with the media, such as reporter Michael Volpe's November 2017 exposure of egregious sexual misconduct incidents, and his January 2018 exposure of former Chief Tony Tooke's sexual misconduct.

When PBS aired in March 2018 we had hope again. The exposure of Tony Tooke's sexual misconduct/forced retirement was the perfect opportunity for the Forest Service to admit there were problems at all levels, and to assess how and why a male manager guilty of sexual misconduct could promote to the highest levels of the agency. It was an opportunity for the agency to delve into this cultural problem, and begin to take decisive action to stop the harassment and hold supervisors and managers accountable. It was our expectation that the agency would acknowledge those of us who have been coming forward (many of us for years), and include us in problem solving initiatives. This did not happen.

Instead, the agency attempted a coverup and tried to make it appear as if Mr. Tooke had only had one consensual relationship that was addressed years prior. We have evidence this was a fabrication of the truth. Mr. Tooke had multiple incidents of unwelcome and unwanted sexual misconduct. So the agency started their so-called attempts to address the work environment issues based on a lie. Our hopes were dashed.

Instead of including employees that had exhibited a past willingness to work with the agency, and who had already identified problems and solutions, the agency took the easy way out to rapidly, and without real thought, put together a “30-day plan” that has been extended into these past eight months. It included listening sessions; “Stand Up” values clarification/training sessions; advisory groups; brochures; screen savers; and more of the usual processes that have proven to be ineffective in the past. While you have been doing all that since March 2018, many of the signatories on this letter have continued to be harassed, bullied, threatened, intimidated, assaulted, and retaliated against for reporting incidents of workplace abuse. We have been improperly investigated; set up with false discipline and performance charges; denied training; denied fire assignments; discriminated against in hiring processes; denied reasonable accommodations; placed on AWOL when we were on sick leave; given illegal PIP's; were verbally and physically abused; charged with discipline for reporting sexual misconduct; and in many instances removed from the Forest Service. Some of us have had to endure being screamed at, and physically threatened by supervisors. Every incident named here has occurred since March 5, 2018 (and long before). You were advised about it. You did not take action to stop it.

Though many of us spoke up during the Listen and Learn sessions/Stand Up sessions, many of us did not. In 2016 Lenise Lago told congress that retaliation was a “perception” of employees, but we know it is real. Many of us observed that managers with harassment claims against them (including sexual harassment) were the ones facilitating these sessions. Regardless, we were required to attend. We noticed that many facilitators were not well trained to present the sessions. We saw managers and supervisors joking and making snide comments about sexual harassment issues, while others slept

through the sessions. We sat there and listened to management and employees blame the women, and blame PBS for having to go through these processes. Intimidating and demeaning comments were made in front of women who had been interviewed by PBS. Comments such as, “Why isn't the Forest Service fighting back against these women?” were made with no counter responses from the facilitators or managers in the room. It was not a safe environment for us to speak up. And we want you to understand, we have real concerns that through your “Stand Up” program you are putting the burden on us to “stand up” and speak out about harassment when you have not made it a safe environment for us to do so. Women (and male employees too) are being retaliated against and you are not holding employees, supervisors, managers, and HR personnel accountable for it. Throughout this entire eight month process, you have not placed the burden on managers and HR to stop the harassment and retaliation. Your new processes are designed to be check-the-box actions, with little actual intent to hold harassers accountable.

For example, your HART/Management Inquiry process is an abject failure. We can supply you with dozens of “harassment unsubstantiated” letters from complaints against repeat offenders. But you already have those. This failed process reminds us that Mr. Tooke was a repeat offender and no action was taken against him either, until he was publicly exposed.

It is our belief that you and your staff, in conjunction with USDA OGC, quickly responded to the PBS/Tooke situation in order to give the appearance of due diligence and “successes” that you can provide to OIG, congress, and the media. We know the OIG report that was supposed to be issued in April 2018 was delayed until the end of FY18. We know that by that time the Forest Service will be able to itemize for OIG these check-the-box processes they developed to address the work environment. We know OIG will give the Forest Service its false stamp of approval. Unfortunately, business will continue as usual. Our working conditions will continue to degrade. We know some of the signatories here will be illegally fired by that time. We believe you and your staff know that too and are unwilling to intervene.

By this letter, we are requesting that you and your staff meet with the women signatory to this letter. We would also like to have a delegation of the women, made up of some of the signatories on this letter, meet with USDA and Forest Service officials to collaborate on problem solving, i.e. identify issues and concerns, discuss resolutions, and make recommendations for corrective action. In the interim, we would like to share our perspective with you.

Managers in the agency have enormous, unchecked authority and power. Managers and supervisors have the ability to:

- mentor an employee and show him/her the ropes of federal employment or ignore the employee;
- approve or deny training that an employee needs for the current job or for career advancement;
- provide or deny details, assignments and task groups that will enhance an employee's job competitiveness;
- provide good or bad references for an employee that can make all the difference in promotion potential;
- make employment decisions based on preferential treatment or personal animosity;
- assist an employee who is having performance problems or set the employee up for failure;
- help an employee with conduct issues to change behavior, or focus on discipline/adverse action;
- approve or deny fire assignments;
- approve or deny leave, overtime, flex-time, work at home, and childcare or elderly care assistance;
- accommodate an employee who is on light duty or has a disability or make it difficult for the employee;
- assist an employee with OWCP or let the employee flounder with the unwieldy process;
- show an employee respect in public, or show disrespect for all to see (by word or deed);
- take action if an employee reports harassment, or ignore/intimidate/discredit the employee;
- use managerial authority/power to sexually harass an employee.

When any of these actions are taken based on gender or other protections then you add discrimination and/or disparate impact to the mix.

Most importantly, a supervisor/manager has the power to show an employee whether he/she is valued and respected, or unwelcome and unwanted in the work group. The acts of refusing to acknowledge the employee's ideas in a meeting, negative body language such as rolling eyes when the employee talks, shunning and isolating the employee from work or social events, treating the employee differently, undermining the employee's success or setting the employee up for failure, talking negatively to others about the employee, and verbal abuse are the antithesis of inclusion. When these

acts are public, it sets a tone for other employees to act accordingly, including work place bullying and mobbing.

Feelings of isolation, despair, anxiety, and depression are real effects of this treatment and can be devastating to an employee's mental, emotional and physical health. As you are aware, employees have attempted and committed suicide over workplace harassment. It also has a deleterious effect on overall morale and productivity. How can an employee look forward and be productive when the employee is constantly looking over his/her shoulder for the knife to be inserted or the hammer to fall? People will take sides. People will wonder if they will be targeted next. People will not focus on work. Use of sick leave will accelerate. This all seems common sense and many books have been written on this subject, yet the negative aspects of this management authority are happening in every way, every day in the Forest Service. Your Human Resources personnel are not doing the job they should be doing to identify and address these problems, and more often they are complicit with your problem managers.

We believe it is imperative that these issues be specifically addressed in your “30 (plus) day plan.” We have ideas and want to share them with you and your staff. To reiterate, we are asking for a group meeting with you, and secondly, we are asking for your staff to meet with a select delegation of women to discuss and find solutions to the matters described in this letter. Please contact us through USDA Coalition of Minority Employees Vice President Lesa Donnelly. We look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

/s/Darla Bush, R5, Sequoia National Forest

/s/Shannon Reed, R3 Regional Office (formerly)

/s/Jonel Wagoner, R5, Sequoia National Forest (ret).

/s/Janine McFarland, R6, Ochoco/Deschutes National Forest

/s/Brooke Nunez, R5, Cleveland National Forest

/s/Carol Hotchkiss, R4, Humboldt-Toiyable National Forest

/s/Denice Rice, R5, Eldorado National Forest

/s/Jayne Nash, R6, Colville National Forest (formerly)

/s/Darlene Hall, R5, Angeles National Forest

/s/Susan Bissell, R5, Shasta Trinity National Forest (formerly)

/s/Elisa Lopez, R5, Tahoe National Forest (formerly)

/s/Rebecca Sands, R5, Stanislaus National Forest

/s/Erin Whitmer, R5, San Bernardino National Forest (formerly)

/s/Peggy Meier - in solidarity

/s/Lenore Will - in solidarity

/s/Deneen Cone, R5, Northern California Service Center (formerly)

/s/Leticia Neal, R6, Umatilla National Forest

/s/Priscilla Peterson, R5, Lassen National Forest

/s/Alicia Dabney, R5, Sequoia National Forest (formerly)

/s/Angela Shanks, Albuquerque Service Center

/s/Heidi Turpen, R5, Sequoia National Forest (formerly)

/s/Amanda DeFrieze, Department of Interior – in solidarity

/s/Therese Alves, R5, Pacific Southwest Research Station

/s/Melody S. Mobley, WO Forest Management (ret.)

/s/Lisa Leinen, R5, Plumas National Forest

/s/Julie Grassie, Department of Interior – in solidarity

/s/Andrea Helming, R5, Los Padres National Forest

/s/Brenda Rodriguez, Albuquerque Service Center

/s/Kym Ganz, R5, Lassen National Forest

/s/Cindy George, Albuquerque Service Center (formerly)

/s/Erin Heier, R5, Cleveland National Forest (formerly)

/s/Jane Kipp, R1, Regional Office

/s/Nicole Hallisey, Department of Interior – in solidarity

/s/Laurel Teehan, Albuquerque Service Center (formerly)

/s/Marge Gallegos, R2, Regional Office

/s/Gina Griffith, R5, San Bernardino National Forest

/s/Susan Baldwin, Department of Homeland Security – in solidarity

/s/Lydia Quintana, Albuquerque Service Center (formerly)

/s/Wynn Avocette, R6, Umatilla National Forest

/s/Vionette James - in solidarity

/s/Lori Salazar, Albuquerque Service Center

/s/Marlyn Briggs, R5, Inyo National Forest (formerly)

/s/Sally A. Feser, R5, Regional Office (ret.)

/s/Kelly Turner, R4, Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest

/s/Cindy Romero, R3, Regional Office

/s/Nancy Synnott, R5, Inyo National Forest (formerly)

/s/Cheryl Raines, R5, Cleveland NF

/s/Leslie Fluck, Albuquerque Service Center (formerly)

/s/Nancy Soriano, R10, Tongass National Forest

/s/Lesa L. Donnelly, Vice President, USDA Coalition of Minority Employees – in solidarity

/s/ 3 Anonymous women - Region 1

/s/ 4 Anonymous women - Region 2

/s/12 Anonymous women - Region 3 & Albuquerque Service Center

/s/ 6 Anonymous women - Region 4

/s/ 19 Anonymous women - Region 5

/s/ 8 Anonymous women - Region 6

/s/ 9 Anonymous women - Region 8

/s/ 1 Anonymous woman - Region 9

/s/ 2 Anonymous women - Region 10

/s/ 4 Anonymous women - WO/Other

cc: House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform,
Honorable Trey Gowdy, Chair; Honorable Elijah Cummings, Ranking Member

Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
Honorable Ron Johnson, Chair; Honorable Claire McCaskill, Ranking Member

The Honorable Jackie Speier

United Nations, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights

USDA Coalition of Minority Employees
Ron Cotton, President; Lawrence Lucas, President Emeritus