

**Statement of
Victoria Christiansen, Chief, USDA Forest Service
Before the
House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform
Concerning
“Examining Misconduct and Retaliation at the U.S. Forest Service”
November 15, 2018**

Chairman Gowdy, Ranking Member Cummings, and members of the Committee: I am grateful for the opportunity to outline the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service’s efforts to permanently eliminate harassment, gender discrimination and retaliation from within the Forest Service.

Since we last testified before this Committee on December 1, 2016, the Forest Service has continued to take action and work diligently to create a workplace where all employees are valued, safe and respected.

I am here today to reaffirm our agency’s unwavering commitment to address unacceptable conduct, and describe steps we have taken to date. You have my ongoing commitment that the Forest Service is dedicated to both deter and prevent such conduct and to take decisive action when it occurs. It will continue to take focused engagement and commitment from all employees at every level.

We are aware that we must do more to stop harassment, bullying and retaliation. We are listening to our employees and learning from the hard truths and heart-wrenching stories they have shared. I am here today to also reiterate my commitment to continue the hard work that will improve our agency’s culture; to continue transparency before this Committee, Congress and the public we serve; and to achieve a workplace where all employees are treated with respect and dignity, so that they do not fear for their safety—physically or emotionally.

We have taken, and continue to take, significant steps to improve policies, accountability, reporting systems, and training around the workplace environment. Prior to the 2016 hearing, the Forest Service adopted an amended comprehensive anti-harassment policy. In 2017, we issued a contract for outside investigators to handle all allegations of sexual harassment. In the past year, we have established a call center staffed by outside personnel who are trained to handle calls of a sensitive nature and route them appropriately. We have also hired case managers who are dedicated to processing cases of harassment, retaliation and bullying.

All 25,000 permanent Forest Service employees were required to participate in “Listen and Learn” sessions earlier this year, where they had direct access to agency leaders to express their concerns and ideas, as well as participate in a day-long “Stand Up for Each Other” event for all employees to increase awareness of our common responsibilities to each other. During these sessions we introduced our agency’s new Code and Commitments to guide

appropriate behavior in our complex and diverse work settings. This guide reflects our values and a commitment to respect everyone, empower one another, invest in relationships, model integrity, protect one another and learn from mistakes.

In addition, we formed an Employee Advisory Group made up of employees across the country, at various grade levels and job titles, which meets monthly with senior executives

Most recently, the Forest Service created a Work Environment and Performance Office within the Office of the Chief. The Office is headed by a Senior Executive whose sole focus is on workplace issues. A dedicated Work Environment Office such as this is considered a best practice both within the federal government and in the private sector. The Work Environment Office will develop tools and resources to help all employees, in order to positively impact and reinforce our Agency culture.

One of the initial efforts of the Work Environment and Performance Office is the establishment of a Victim Advocacy and Support structure to support employees who experience physical abuse, harassment, bullying and retaliation. We are also conducting an assessment of work environment agency-wide to improve our understanding of employee's perceptions and understanding of harassment in the agency. Based on these assessments, we will revise the anti-harassment policy as necessary. We are also implementing a new performance management metric for all supervisors in Fiscal Year 2019 and developing a public-facing website to improve transparency about our work environment.

But let me be clear: as I acknowledge our ongoing work, I know there is much more we **must** do. As the leader of this agency, I am personally determined to continue this cultural change in the Forest Service. The adherence to and promotion of civil rights is part of the Forest Service's mission. We must ensure nothing stands in the way of achieving the mission the American people expect of us.

Thank you again for the opportunity to be here today, and I welcome your ideas and questions.



Vicki Christiansen

Chief

Vicki Christiansen serves as Chief of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Forest Service in Washington, D.C., after serving as Interim Chief since March 8, 2018. In her 36-year career in natural resource and wildland fire management, she brings a wealth of experiences and skills that demonstrate a commitment to the core values of the Forest Service. This includes conservation, service, interdependence, diversity and safety. She works daily to live up to these values in every facet of her leadership and service. She demonstrates them as she leads a workforce of more than 25,000 permanent employees who steward 193 million acres of national forests and grasslands; support the world's largest forestry research organization; and work with states, tribes and the public to sustain all forests so they can benefit all citizens, today and in the future.

Prior to serving as Chief, she worked as Deputy Chief for State and Private Forestry, where she oversaw Fire and Aviation Management, Tribal Relations, Forest Health Protection, Cooperative Forestry, Grey Towers National Historic Site, and Conservation Education.

Vicki joined the Forest Service in 2010 as the Deputy Director of Fire and Aviation Management. She worked extensively on the National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy, bringing her experience as a line officer, land manager, wildland fire fighter, and State Forester to the effort while building strong ties with leaders at the state, regional and national levels. She played a prominent role leading the agency's *Life First* initiative to significantly increase the odds of firefighters and other staff returning home safely after assignments. Throughout all her roles, she has been an unwavering voice for creating a safe, inclusive, diverse workforce.

Prior to joining the Forest Service, Vicki served as the Arizona State Forester and Director of the Arizona Division of Forestry, where she was responsible for the protection of 22 million acres of state and private lands in Arizona. Her responsibilities included chairing the Wildland Fire Committee for the National Association of State Foresters.

Vicki previously served as the Washington State Forester, the culmination of a 26-year career with Washington State Department of Natural Resources (DNR). She started as a wildland firefighter in 1980 while still in college and later held positions in operations, managing state trust lands, and regulating forest practices on state and private lands. Her first permanent position was in 1983 as a forester responsible for the reforestation of state trust lands in the Mt. Saint Helens volcanic blast zone.

Vicki has achieved numerous credentials in the wildland fire program with special expertise as a fire-line blasting advisor. She earned a bachelor's degree in forest management at the University of Washington (1983, cum laude).

A native of Washington State, Vicki is married to a Fire Chief (retired) and has two grown sons.