A Forest Service Story

Fire and Line were married at the turn of the twentieth century. Their marriage was consummated in the fires of 1910. Together, they made history.

They built fire lookouts, trails, and ranger stations. They packed supplies into the backcountry and, most importantly, fought fire together, usually under the leadership of a district ranger or forest supervisor.

Everyone was a jack-of-all-trades. Planting trees, maintaining trails, staffing a lookout, and fighting fire were all part of the work. A ranger might spend one day tending the forest and the next leading a crew to protect it. Fire was woven into the everyday life of the Forest Service. The people who cared for the land were also the people who answered the call when it burned.

For decades, that shared work ethic held the family together. By the 1980s, however, the Forest Service family was beginning to drift apart. Timber's place at the head of the table was increasingly challenged. Wildlife biologists, hydrologists, archaeologists, and other specialists brought additional knowledge and responsibilities into forest management, including the work required under the National Environmental Policy Act.

Many timber people felt that the additional analysis was getting in the way of harvesting timber. Specialists understood their work as necessary to examine the consequences of those decisions. The tension was evident even at district potlucks. People still gathered around the same table, but the disagreements from the office and the field came with them.

The agency also broadened leadership at the district and forest levels beyond professionally trained foresters. New leaders brought diverse backgrounds and perspectives. Managing a forest requires balancing more demands, hearing more voices, and spending more time on planning, public involvement, and administration.

Fire was changing, too. Increasingly specialized training, equipment, and qualification requirements made it harder for employees to move between their regular duties and fire assignments. The Forest Service "militia"—employees whose primary jobs were outside fire, but who responded when needed—found it increasingly difficult to maintain qualifications while keeping up with their everyday work.

Following the severe fire season of 2000, President Bill Clinton directed the Secretaries of Agriculture and the Interior to develop a response. Their report helped establish the National Fire Plan (NFP), which expanded the commitment to firefighting capacity, hazardous fuels reduction, restoration, and community assistance.

The NFP accelerated changes, already underway. Previously, the Tri-Data Wildland Fire Safety Awareness Study made significant recommendations in multiple program areas: Leadership Development and Human Factors, Organizational Culture and Accountability and Physical Fitness and Health Tracking to name a few. It went as far as to demand "unification of conflicting safety rules, terminology, and operational qualifications across the five federal land management agencies."

Fire line training and position qualification requirements became standardized under the Interagency Fire Program Management (IFPM) system, complete with position task books that now formalized position qualification and certification requirements. Fire was becoming an

increasingly specialized profession, with demands that required sustained oversight through training, qualifications, and successful position performance through repetitive experience.

The old model made it difficult to sustain forest regular crews assembled for large fires, smokechaser squads drawn from the militia after a fast-moving lightning storm, and line officers who personally led the response. Those practices became less common as workloads and qualification requirements grew. District rangers and forest supervisors continued to carry responsibility for fire decisions, but fewer could participate in large fire support as their predecessors had.

Fire and Line still depended on each other. Line carried responsibility for the land and its many uses. Fire brought oversight responsibility and operational experience for the people doing dangerous work on the ground. District and forest fire management officers provided program expertise as subject matter experts to support Line. Yet their daily work increasingly pulled them in different directions.

The Forest Service of today is a different organization from the one established in 1905, even though its basic hierarchy remains recognizable. District personnel, including fire personnel, operate within an organization led by district rangers. District rangers and supervisor's office staff answer to a forest supervisor, who answers to a regional forester.

With all of these changes, the time has come to consolidate the fire program into a clear professional chain of command: district fire management officers reporting to forest fire management officers, forest fire management officers reporting to regional fire directors, and regional fire directors reporting to a national fire director.

This organizational structure can co-exist at the same time with the traditional Line Officer configuration as the fire organization would reside in the District (and Forest), participate in staff meetings, all while working alongside and with their non-fire counterparts. There have been successful examples of centralized fire programs and or Service First programs that bring efficiencies and effectiveness to the agency within all phases of the Fire Management triangle (Suppression, Fuels Management and Prevention) and work across a Unit without limitations of organizational boundaries, either at the District, Forest or Unit level.

Such a structure could clarify accountability, improve coordination, and give training, staffing, and operational readiness more consistent direction. It would also need to preserve close coordination with the line officers responsible for land management decisions.

Fire and Line have more than a century of shared history. Their future partnership should recognize how much their work has changed and the need to adapt to the changing environment the agency finds itself in. They need an organization that supports the specialized demands of fire while keeping its work connected to the land and communities both were entrusted to serve.

Adjusting to the changed condition allows the National Forest System to continue to exist for the benefit of those we serve, and this is "the greatest good for the greatest number in the long run."