

Threats to Natural Resources Management

Wildlife managers traditionally focused on conserving wildlife and habitats have a new challenge to address: conserving natural resources management. Demographic, economic, and political trends indicate that it is not just wildlife that is endangered; it is the future of our profession. Awareness and understanding of this emerging crisis are necessary and action is essential if we are to save not only wildlife and habitat, but ourselves.

The Office of Personnel Management estimates that 19% (281,000) of the federal workforce will retire between fiscal years 2001 and 2005. Retirement and attrition rates for the Department of the Interior track those of the federal government—approximately 20% will retire by 2005. The General Accounting Office projects that approximately 45% (2,700) of federal employees in the Senior Executive Service will retire by the end of FY 2005. States are experiencing similar trends. A study by the National Association of State Personnel Executives shows that state governments will lose 30% of their workforce by 2006.

High retirement rates combine with other factors to foreshadow a crisis. A decade of downsizing of the federal bureaucracy during the 1990s hit natural resources agencies particularly hard. The Department of the Interior's federal workforce fell by 12.8% between 1993 and 2000 and the Department of Agriculture's fell by 15%. Current workforce composition is changing—the average age of the government worker is on the rise. Budget woes for federal and state governments are climbing as well. Congress will be considerably tight-fisted with discretionary spending over the next 30 years, to ensure adequate funds to pay interest on national debt, Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid. Static or reduced budgets will make it difficult for agencies to fill positions vacated by retirees. Add to all that the continuing political pressure to downsize the federal workforce and outsource an array of traditionally government jobs, and a minatory predicament is born.

The workforce problem has several implications for natural resources management. Significant experiential support, institutional knowledge, and leadership stability—necessary for effective management and mission accomplishment—will be lost with retiring employees. In their wake, large-scale changes in key leadership positions and an increasing chance of inexperienced people being assigned to such positions are likely. Breakdown in traditional partnerships, agreements, and understandings may further undermine government performance and accountability. In addition, reductions in operating budgets may require diverting funds

from achieving public goals to addressing staffing problems or to paying contract employees. All of this indicates a lapse in natural resources stewardship and management at a time when challenges to sustainable resource management and conflicts among competing users require diligent attention and stable services.

The incipient human capital catastrophe is not helped by the lack of candidates available to fill anticipated vacancies. Even if the pool of young skilled workers were not small, the federal government still would be struggling to attract new talent. Interest in government employment is low for a number of reasons, including poor recruitment, arduous and slow application and hiring processes, inability to compete with the private sector, and a pervasive image problem. The government should address these issues through strategic workforce planning, relationship building with colleges and universities, and more effective human capital management. However, in the interim, the results of widespread succession will be manifest.

Loss of experiential and institutional knowledge through reductions in government workforce, whether from retirements or downsizing, and lapse in management during the “changing of the guard” could seriously impact the ability of state and federal governments to conserve wildlife and habitat. At a time when demands on our natural resource base are changing and expanding, this could have devastating effects. Natural resources professionals must be informed of this issue and take an active role in addressing it. We must maintain professionalism in management activities during the transition, promoting professional certification and encouraging agency recruitment of certified professionals. We should encourage of strategic workforce planning within agencies, to ensure smooth, deliberate changes in management and leadership, instead of reactive, unplanned changes. We should assist in improving agency image and recruitment, and work with universities to prepare graduates for work within the government. And we need to take action now to assure a smooth transition to an effective future workforce for wildlife agencies.

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