

President's Podium

Challenges to the wildlife profession come in all shapes and sizes. We often speak of certain wildlife assets being threatened or endangered, which causes us great concern and mobilizes significant mitigating efforts. Another asset in our profession that we should be urgently concerned about is a “human resource” dimension—the anticipated loss of critical mass, institutional memory, and philosophical clarity in our state and federal natural-resource conservation agencies. The projected turnover of natural-resource professionals in public agencies has been described by some as an emerging crisis in the management of natural resources in the United States. Indeed, when one considers the magnitude, proportions, and precipitous nature of the changes ahead, “crisis” does not seem an overstatement.

Let's look at some numbers. Across the federal government, about 30 percent of the 1.6 million full-time employees in agencies will be eligible to retire in 2005. An additional 20 percent could seek early retirement. This critical situation is not limited to the federal government. The National Association of State Personnel Executives warns that state governments could lose more than 30 percent of their workforce by 2006. There is no reason to think natural-resource agencies will be spared their share of these reductions. Furthermore, many natural-resource agencies have already experienced large losses of staff due to retirements, and are feeling the negative effects of those losses.

Several factors combine with current labor conditions to foretell a crisis. These factors are: the rates of employee retirement, the composition of the current workforce, budget problems, and political agendas. Thus, the combination of workforce demographic trends and more than a decade of budget cutting and reductions in force raises serious questions about the continuing traditional role of government in managing our natural resources. This has been exacerbated by recent efforts to downsize the federal workforce and to outsource many jobs that were formerly performed by government employees. Natural resource and environmental agencies will be particularly impacted by these initiatives. The implications for the effective management of natural resources are as follows:

- Lack of qualified candidates to fill vacant positions that are preserved
- Massive changes in key leadership positions and responsibilities
- Likelihood of inexperienced people being assigned to key positions
- Loss of institutional knowledge as senior employees retire

- Breakdown in long-standing partnerships, agreements, and understandings among agencies
- Reductions in operating budgets

TWS has a role at state and national levels in the natural-resource personnel issue because of the management implications associated with the staff transformation in state and federal agencies. The potential impacts to agency relationships and long-standing programs may be systemic and far-reaching. As challenges to sustainable resource management grow commensurate with economic development pressures, and as the inevitable conflicts among competing uses and interests intensify with respect to our natural resources, TWS has opportunities to provide leadership and assistance in many ways. TWS must grasp these opportunities and be vigilant to ensure that professionalism in the management of natural resources continues during the next few transitional years. In this spirit, TWS should:

- Work in partnership with other professional organizations (e.g., American Fisheries Society, Society of American Foresters) and with agency directorates to institutionalize requirements for hiring certified natural-resource professionals in future recruitment campaigns.
- Assist agencies to do proper workforce planning to ensure that traditional management and leadership responsibilities are changed by design rather than by default.
- Inventory the potential wildlife biologists who are unemployed or underemployed in the profession and may also be available for employment in agencies.
- Work with universities to determine the supply and distribution of qualified graduates who will become available over the next 5 years (including the retooling of previous graduates who never found a professional position upon graduation).
- Encourage universities to aggressively expand their outreach to diverse populations, and emphatically encourage agencies to diversify their workforces to better reflect the changing population demographics.

This certainly will be an area of policy activity by TWS over the next several years. TWS Council will be considering how best to address this need from our perspective, but state chapters undoubtedly have opportunities to work with other professional societies and state universities to positively influence state agency approaches to workforce planning. We all need to aim for minimizing the effects of the loss of experienced people and the technical expertise, institutional

memory, and philosophical foundation they have provided to our public natural resource conservation agencies.

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