

Congress of the United States

House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND GOVERNMENT REFORM

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Opening Statement Ranking Member Elijah E. Cummings

Hearing on "Examining Misconduct and Retaliation at the U.S. Forest Service" November 15, 2018

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for calling today's hearing to examine sexual harassment and retaliation at the Forest Service.

Let me begin by thanking the thousands of employees working for the Forest Service, the Park Service, the Bureau of Land Management, and numerous other federal and state agencies who risk their lives to fight the deadly fires spreading across our western states.

Given the life-threatening risks that Forest Service employees regularly face in their careers, it is critical that we ensure that the Forest Service is a place where no one feels afraid to come to work because of what a co-worker might do to them.

Over the past two years, employees in the Forest Service have continued to come forward to the media and to this Committee to report sexual harassment and even sexual assault. They have expressed profound fear that, because of their reports, they may suffer retaliation and retribution that could limit or potentially even end their careers at the Forest Service.

The Forest Service has made improvements in the processes it uses to receive and investigate allegations of harassment and bullying. But it is clear that, two years later, many employees still believe the agency tolerates harassment, bullying, and retaliation.

Even worse, the Forest Service has not fully cooperated with the Committee's oversight efforts. Documents provided in response to the Committee's requests contain extensive and inappropriate redactions. They contradict the agency's claim it is committed to transparency. The productions also appear to be incomplete given the scope of the Committee's requests.

From the information we do have, it appears that the Forest Service still has much work to do to ensure that the victims of harassment and bullying—particularly those working in remote areas—receive the support they need when they report assault or harassment.

Today, we will hear from the Chief of the Forest Service and the Inspector General of the Department of Agriculture. We will also hear from Shannon Reed, a former Forest Service employee who alleges that she was the victim of harassment and then of retaliation after allegations were reported to Forest Service leadership.

I thank the Chairman for agreeing to my request to hear testimony directly from a witness who can tell us what it is really like to work for the Forest Service and to navigate its investigative processes. I thank Ms. Reed for her courage in coming forward and for her willingness to testify.

Today more than ever, the Oversight Committee has a critical role to play in ensuring that federal processes for handling allegations of assault, harassment, and bullying are fair and timely and that they truly protect employees' rights.

The Committee must conduct thorough oversight over how agencies handle allegations of harassment and bullying. If agencies like the Forest Service fail to cooperate fully, the Committee must consider alternative means to obtain complete and unredacted information.

The Committee also must ensure that the Forest Service will hold perpetrators fully accountable. The Committee still has not received answers to even the most basic questions about allegations against former Forest Service Chief Tony Tooke, including how the allegations were raised, the specific nature of the allegations, and how they are being investigated. This is not acceptable.

Finally, the Committee must ensure that once investigations are completed, real reforms are made. As we move into the 116th Congress, I look forward to the Committee conducting systematic and thorough investigations of the processes utilized at the Forest Service and throughout the government to receive and investigate allegations of harassment and bullying, to support and protect victims, and to ensure accountability.

I also anticipate developing long overdue legislation to strengthen standards for these processes and to expand transparency as much as possible while protecting privacy.

Federal employees have a right to work in an environment where they are not afraid of what a co-worker or supervisor might do to them—or what might happen if they report what that person has done.

I thank the witnesses for being here, and I look forward to their testimony. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

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