

Printed on: December 08, 2010

USFS morale event postponed



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The supervisor of the Salmon-Challis National Forest said Tuesday he's postponing a getaway for as many as 100 employees aimed at boosting work force morale.

The event, originally scheduled for today and Thursday, would have included two half-days of meetings and a presentation by professional speaker Jeri Mae Rowley, Forest Service Supervisor Frank Guzman said. Its price tag -- including Rowley's \$3,500 fee, as many as 80 rooms at the Shilo Inn and traveling expenses -- came to about \$23,000, according to Guzman's estimates.

Concerns about traveling through bad driving weather forced Guzman to postpone the event until springtime, he said.

He said part of the reason for planning the morale-building event was a 2010 survey by the Partnership for Public Service, which ranked employee satisfaction at the U.S. Forest Service near the bottom of all federal agencies.

"Essentially, somebody working in the IRS is happier than somebody in Salmon who gets to work out in the woods," he said.

Guzman said he's never put together anything similar to this event.

The meetings were to focus on "everything affecting" employee satisfaction, he said, including working conditions, safety and leadership. The last item was the lowest point in the survey for Forest Service workers. While agency employees' satisfaction with the performance of "supervisors" was ranked 151st of 223 comparable agencies, higher-level "leaders" were ranked 205th.

John Palguta, the partnership's vice president for policy, said it's not uncommon for employees to think more highly of supervisors than upper-level leaders. The dissatisfaction can result from many problems, he said, including frustration with changes in agency policy.

While the partnership's survey should be taken seriously, Palguta said, it stops short of telling agencies what they should do to improve their rankings.

"Good survey research, which this is, doesn't give you all the answers, but it gives you some of the questions you should be asking," he said.

Larry Chambers, a spokesman for the Forest Service headquarters in Washington, D.C., said the agency is working to address employees' concerns as expressed in the survey.

"We have heard them loud and clear and are taking a number of steps to correct these issues," Chambers said.

Rowley said much of her presentation would focus on stress, particularly what she considers the unique kind of stress federal employees experience.

"Part of the challenge is that you're serving people who are citizens," she said. "They are owners of your organization and because of that, their expectations are higher."

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