



Promoting Fire Ecology Research, Education, and Management

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STATEMENT OF DR. LEDA KOBZIAR,
PRESIDENT, ASSOCIATION FOR FIRE ECOLOGY,
SUBMITTED FOR THE FULL HOUSE COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND
GOVERNMENT REFORM,
HEARING ON EXAMINING SEXUAL HARASSMENT AND GENDER DISCRIMINATION
AT THE US DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE,
DECEMBER 1, 2016, 9:00 AM

Chairman Chaffetz, Ranking Member Cummings, and members of the committee, thank you for inviting the Association for Fire Ecology (AFE) to submit testimony on the important topic of sexual harassment and gender discrimination in wildland fire management. Because of concerns regarding the prevalence of this issue, and in recognition of the paucity of quantitative data, AFE composed and distributed a survey on this topic during the spring and summer of 2015, the results of which we report here. As the President of the Association for Fire Ecology, I feel it is my duty to advocate for the diverse membership of our professional association, which represents thousands of wildland fire professionals from across the country. Our mission to enhance wildland fire management through science and education is threatened when federal work environments are complacent about sexual harassment and gender discrimination: this complacency negatively impacts an employee's participation and discourages potential employees from joining the workforce. A culture of complacency prevents effective communication and knowledge exchange, which are critical to solving complex problems in natural resource management. In some cases, such a culture directly limits scientists and managers from safely doing their jobs. We strongly encourage this Committee to encourage the US Department of Agriculture to adopt proactive policies and practices to ensure that employees experiencing sex- or gender-based discrimination have consistent and comprehensive access to meaningful solutions.

While the AFE survey concentrated on instances of sexual harassment and gender discrimination in wildland fire management, such instances are unfortunately part of a broader pattern that occurs globally in other vocations as well as outside of the workplace. For example, within the general workplace population in the US, 40-75% of women and 13-31% of men have reported being sexually harassed.

Our survey confirmed that sexual harassment and gender discrimination are prevalent in wildland fire management. Of 342 respondents, 81% lived in the United States at the time they responded and 45% worked for a Federal Agency. Of the respondents, 32% reported observing

incidents of sexual harassment in the workplace while 24% reported having experienced it. Additionally, 54% reported observing gender discrimination of others in the workplace and 44% reported personally experiencing discrimination. Instances of gender discrimination and sexual harassment were widely varied, ranging from comments (such as, “The engine captain had me ride alone with him and spoke in great detail about my breasts”), to lack of inclusion of women in discussions regarding strategy and tactics, to sexual assault.

In our survey of wildland fire professionals, the majority of respondents who experienced sexual harassment (64%) and gender discrimination (60%) did not report it. Factors that inhibited reporting included: fear of job loss (especially for temporary or seasonal employees), fear of retribution or retaliation, being viewed as a victim or as overly sensitive, belief that the harasser would not be penalized, lack of knowledge regarding rights, and limited accessibility to external supports (e.g., mental health or legal counseling services). Results of our survey indicated that those who reported being sexually harassed were supported by their manager 58% of the time and by their organization 53% of the time, but rarely by external entities or legal intervention. Those who reported gender discrimination and requested support reported receiving support less often than those who reported sexual harassment. In these cases, managers were supportive only 28% of the time, and organizations were supportive only 25% of the time. Some respondents indicated that gender discrimination was difficult to prove or was so entrenched in the culture that “nobody will give [it] credence.”

Respondents in our wildland fire workforce survey indicated that they cope with sexual harassment and gender discrimination by: 1) trying to ignore the issue or avoid the perpetrator; 2) resigning (sometimes with negative repercussions for career); 3) working harder and focusing on goals; 4) feeling depressed, bitter, isolated, angry, stressed, or anxious (with at least one respondent reporting a mental health breakdown); 5) reaching out to colleagues (especially female colleagues) for advice; 6) speaking directly to the offender; 7) seeking assistance with mental health support; 8) engaging in meditation, yoga, or prayer; 9) using legal intervention; and 10) engaging in substance abuse. Research indicates that the gravest psychological outcomes tend to occur when harassment is perpetrated by a supervisor, when it involves sexual coercion, occurs cross-racially, takes place over a long period of time, or occurs in a male-dominated setting, such as wildland fire management.

Given the results of AFE’s survey, it is apparent that reporting of cases of sexual harassment and gender discrimination needs to be increased, as the majority of those who experienced it did not report it. This will require dismantling of the culture of non-reporting due to fear of reprisals or suggestions that the target is somehow responsible for her or his

harassment or discrimination. Perpetrators need to realize that failure to attenuate behavior will have real and negative consequences, and these consequences must be institutionalized as well as embraced in a new culture of inclusion.

A model recently implemented in Canada may provide a template for the wildland fire fighting community. A 2015 study conducted by an external reviewer to the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) found that the cultural value and functional necessity of maintaining the chain of command in the Forces contributed to stifling of incident reporting, lack of awareness on the part of senior leaders, and subsequent inability of senior leadership to act effectively. This same study

noted that “dismissive responses” regarding sexual harassment and gender discrimination were present within leadership, and would no longer be tolerated. In direct response to this report, in September 2015, the CAF created an external Sexual Misconduct Reporting Centre, which removed the initial reporting for sexual harassment and discrimination from the chain of command. It is staffed with professionals who are familiar with the working systems of the CAF and who offer counseling, and can liaise with other local, national, and emergency resources as well as assist in navigating the reporting system within the CAF.

The Association for Fire Ecology recommends that wildfire agencies might benefit from establishing external reporting centers similar to the CAF in Canada, following the emerging best practices, in order to: 1) facilitate reporting and protect reporting individuals from retaliation or retribution, and 2) provide much-needed support to victims. Having such an external center reduces the considerable stigma and personal cost often incurred by those reporting sexual harassment or gender discrimination within the chain of command. These centers could still be affiliated within the structure of the organization, in line with the CAF model, but not be within the chain of command or supervisory reporting structure.

Workplace leadership also needs to address significant failures in creating a harassment- and discrimination-free workplace, in which those responsible for harassment or discrimination are held accountable for their actions by those in supervisory or leadership positions. Increased training at all levels, with regard to unacceptable behavior and what processes and policies are in place for reporting and support, will also assist in changing cultural perceptions. Accountability must be perpetuated via the fomenting of a zero-tolerance culture through education, training, and serious repercussions for misconduct.

As proponents of the power of education to create change, AFE also recommends that the National Wildfire Coordinating Group develop modules to be embedded into existing Incident Command System leadership training courses. Content for these modules can come from any number of existing courses on the subject area in use by other command-and-control type environments such as structural fire, police, or the military. The wildland fire management community can take a leadership role by delivering training that will educate personnel on acceptable and unacceptable behavior, policy, process, and consequences.

This proactive approach, underscored by appropriate reactions to misconduct, will help to prevent incidents before they occur and help leaders to deal with incidents that do occur in a responsible and timely manner.

We have attached an AFE report and infographic with more complete information on the results of our survey.

AFE thanks the Committee for devoting its time and attention to resolving this important matter.

Sincerely,



Leda Kobziar, President
Association for Fire Ecology