

USFS yanks \$10 mil. contract to boost its image

By Associated Press

GRANTS PASS, Ore. — The U.S. Forest Service has abruptly decided not to spend \$10 million on a five-year nationwide public relations campaign to brand itself as a public agency that cares about people and nature.

The agency was planning on the campaign at a time when it's struggling to pay for fighting wildfires, maintaining trails and offering timber for sale. It has also faced a major public backlash in the West over plans to close trails and roads to motorized vehicles due to a lack of money for maintenance, as well as to prevent erosion and protect fish and wildlife.

The Forest Service issued a statement Tuesday saying that it had not accepted any contract bids and would look for other ways to enhance the public's access to national forests and understanding about what the agency does.

The agency wouldn't say why it withdrew the contract.

Andy Stahl, director of the watchdog group Forest Service Employees for Environmental Ethics, said he thought the agency's leaders "finally listened to Forest Service employees, and no one thought this was a good idea."

Stahl said that after he learned of the contract, he sent an email to 25,000 Forest Service employees, and about half of them opened it. He got about 50 replies, all critical, suggesting the money could be put to better use on recreation programs, revising forest management plans, restoring ecosystems, hiring more employees, and lifting a three-year wage freeze.

Forest Service retirees also objected. Al Matecko, retired chief of public and legislative affairs for the northwest region and head of the Old Smokies, which represents about 950 retirees, said he received 50 emails from members who were strongly opposed. He passed on those objections to Forest Service leaders, Matecko said.

"Retirees were just amazed that at this time of shrinking budgets, the Forest Service could find \$10 million," he said.

Jim Golden, a retired deputy regional forester for the northwest region and chairman of the board of the National Association of Forest Service Retirees, said he warned Forest Service Chief Tom Tidwell in an email on Saturday of the "growing firestorm" among retirees unless the agency got out some information explaining the campaign. But Tidwell never came through with a promised briefing paper. Golden said.

"Our primary reaction was one of suspicion," he said. "Not many retirees believe the Forest Service needs a new brand. Most of us believe the simple (motto), 'Caring for the land and serving the people,' is pretty effective."

Last fall, the agency awarded a \$526,799 no-bid contract to Metropolitan Group of Portland for a branding campaign titled "Valuing People and Place" in Forest Service regions covering Oregon, Washington, southern Idaho, Utah, Wyoming and Nevada, according to the federal website FedBizOpps.gov. It was the only no-bid contract issued by the U.S. Department of Agriculture out of more than 3,000.

Another federal website, USAspending.gov, shows the Forest Service has paid Metropolitan Group \$3.6 million since 2011, much of it for the Valuing People and Place campaign.

The area covers national forests where the Forest Service has faced intense public backlash to plans to close roads and trails on national forest to motorized traffic.

Metropolitan Group's Portland office did not immediately return a phone message asking for comment. Its website describes the company as a "full-service social change agency that crafts and integrates strategic and creative services. We help our clients with strategic communication, multicultural engagement, organizational development and resource development to build a just and sustainable world."

The website describes the company's work for the Forest Service as helping it reflect on its roots, discover its future, and "rediscover the meaning behind (Forest Service founder) Gifford Pinchot's early direction to 'find the greatest good.' "

The website adds that Metropolitan Group was helping train Forest Service employees to deal with the public on the agency's so-called Travel Management plans, which refers to the road and trail closures.

The Forest Service filed notice Nov. 28, the day after Thanksgiving, that it was soliciting bids to expand the campaign nationwide at a cost of \$10 million over five years. Bids were to close Dec. 26.

"It's called the 'Take out the trash season'," Stahl said. "It's when government does things it doesn't want people to know about."

Stahl sent out his email Dec. 26, and the Forest Service filed notice it was extending the bid period to Dec. 29. A week later, it announced it was not accepting any bids.

Established in 1905, the Forest Service manages 154 national forests, grasslands and other units covering 193 million acres in 40 states.