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Information-Education in Public Forestry
Michael B. Hathaway

Public relations, a legitimate activity in some circles, can be a dirty word when it comes to the Federal Government. Yet, public agencies such as the Forest Service must, out of necessity, engage in several aspects of public relations.

Douglas Gilbert, author of *Natural Resources and Public Relations*, in discussing this problem notes... “public recognition of the necessity for good, sound management methods and public confidence in the professional manager’s ability to do a good job must be developed.”

Congress specifically prohibits public agencies, including the Forest Service, from engaging in certain public relations activities—and justifiably so. No part of the Federal Government should be allowed to spend taxpayers’ money in an effort to create a favorable image of itself, or even worse, to create a favorable but false image. Congress, therefore, appropriates no money for these types of public relations activities.

But what about the other aspects of public relations? Organizations need to inform the public about their activities. This need becomes particularly acute for agencies such as the Forest Service because the agency manages lands owned by the public. The public is entitled to know how the Forest Service is managing its lands and to be involved in decision making.

Viewed from another perspective, an agency can be doing a credible job meeting its responsibilities, yet the public may be unaware of those activities. In such instances, if accusations of mismanagement are made, they are most often believed. Clearly, a public agency does have a responsibility to keep the public informed about its activities, if for no other reason than to dispel inaccurate information.

Thus, the Forest Service needs to engage in the information aspects of public relations activities, but it must not attempt to create a favorable false image of itself. To meet this need, the agency conducts an information-education (I&I) program. I&E is not just bureaucratic gobbledygook that translates to public relations under close scrutiny. Rather, it is a program designed to inform and involve the public. Unlike pure public relations, efforts are not made to influence how favorably the public views the Forest Service. The facts of the whole story are presented and issues are not distorted. The public is left to make up its own mind about how “favorable” things may be. To be sure, the line between public relations and I&E activities is fine, but one that must never be crossed.

Perspective of The Eastern Region I&E Job and Program

The 20-State Eastern Region of the Forest Service represents a complex and diverse area from many standpoints, including I&E. The Region, reaching from Maine to Minnesota and from Missouri to Maryland, encompasses 54% of the Nation’s population. This population base ranges from the highly urbanized metropolitan centers to the more sparsely populated rural areas. As a consequence, it includes all manner of interest and user groups. Included are the strictly preservation-minded, those espousing multiple use, and those with exploitative motives. Backgrounds vary widely regarding scientific land management concepts and environmental awareness.

The National Forests of the Eastern Region contain about 11 million acres of public land or about 6% of the total National Forest land base. This is a small percentage compared to the large population it must serve. These lands most often occur in scattered patterns, intermingled with state, county, corporate and private ownerships. The large population and relatively small public ownership of the Eastern Region, coupled with the increasing and often conflicting demands placed upon the lands, only underscores the need for a viable I&E program.

The Eastern Region, like the majority of the other Forest Service Regions, has an Office of Information serving in direct staff support to the Regional Forester. The Office’s staff includes a Director, a Public Information Officer and a Legislative Coordinator. These are most often individuals with experience in resource management, but with training and interests in the information field. The staff also includes writers, artists, an audiovisual specialist and an environmental education specialist. On a given job, parts or all of the staff may be called upon to handle a particular information project. Each of the Eastern Region National Forests also has an information officer. In a few cases, this is a full-time job, but most often these individuals have duties in addition to information activities. Other personnel, at all levels of the organization, are called upon from time to time to assist with the information program. For example, a substantial portion of the District Ranger’s job falls within the scope of information activities. Specialists in all fields perform information duties when called upon to do so.

It is easiest to look at the Eastern Region’s I&E program by focusing on its various components...
separately; however, it is rare when only one component is used for a particular situation. More commonly, a combination of the components are used to plan and carry out an information project. The basic components include public information, public involvement, environmental education, internal communications and legislative affairs.

Public information, as the name implies, deals with that portion of the I&E program designed to keep the public informed about how they can make use of National Forest lands, resources and facilities. It also provides the public with continuing current information on the status of ongoing projects, programs, activities and accomplishments. This basic information job is the more traditional aspect of the I&E program.

Public information is disseminated in a variety of ways, with particular projects using the most appropriate means to reach the public, or portions of the public, for which the information is designed. Methods include news releases for the printed and electronic media, reports, letters, draft and final plans, brochures, maps, slide programs, motion pictures, personal contacts and group presentations. A combination of these methods are often used for any given project.

Public involvement is the close relative and often inseparable partner of public information. Involvement programs are designed to gain information from the public rather than provide information to the public. Normally, before “public input” can be obtained, the Forest Service must first provide information on which the public can make its response. Input from the public can be obtained from public meetings, (both formal and informal) working groups, advisory groups, written responses or on a one-to-one basis.

Public involvement is a vital aid to the land manager in the decision-making process. It is the way managers learn about the desires of the public and how the public views the management of its lands. No public agency can function properly without public involvement. To do so would be a futile attempt to operate in a vacuum.

Environmental education is the somewhat newer name and approach for a traditional information program, conservation education. The objective of the Forest Service environmental education program is to provide the public with a background of the complexities and scientific bases pertaining to resource management and to develop environmental awareness. The program acquaints the public with the realities that management of resources often generates environmental issues, requiring action plans with alternatives that are acceptable in our social and political systems. The program is designed to show people a systematic way to investigate the environment, organize their thoughts and actions, and develop a data base from which to make their decisions.

In the Eastern Region, the bulk of our environmental education program is geared to workshops for educators, resource personnel and leaders of various groups. The program teaches not only concepts of resource management from an environmental standpoint, but also methods that participants can use when they return to their respective jobs. In this manner, Forest Service efforts can be expanded by a “multiplier effect” of conveying concepts and methods to those who teach others. In many instances, environmental education workshops can be an effective public involvement technique.

Internal communications are the information activities geared to Forest Service employees. It is as important as external communications. Forest Service decision-makers and all employees must be kept aware of major external factors that may impact the agency’s programs and activities. Also, all employees must be aware of current policies and activities. Effective and timely internal communications become doubly important when the diversity and decentralized nature of the Eastern Region is considered. In addition to the traditional methods of internal communications of news letters, reports and meetings, the Eastern region has found that video tape programs are very effective. For example, the technique makes it possible for the Chief or the Regional Forester to speak directly to all personnel about important policy matters or new programs. Also, messages from groups or individuals outside of the Forest Service on important subjects can be readily disseminated. Video tape has proven to be an effective training medium, often eliminating or reducing costly travel by personnel. Once the programs are produced and placed on tape, the tapes can be readily mailed to each of the 14 Supervisors’ offices in the Eastern Region. The messages can be viewed on a timely basis at the field locations.

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Legislative affairs forms another component of the I&E program. At first glance, the question can, and should, be asked about the relationship of a governmental agency to the legislative process. Since Congress provides the authorities that govern the activities of the Forest Service, the relationship has several dimensions.

When legislation is being considered to alter or influence the authorities of the Forest Service, the Members of Congress must have first-hand knowledge to aid them in their decision-making process. To meet this need, Members of Congress often visit National Forests to view management programs. Also, Forest Service officers are routinely asked to testify at Congressional hearings about bills affecting the management of natural resources.

Constituents of Senators and Representatives make inquiries about Forest Service programs. Some inquiries are quite specific, involving items that directly affect the constituent. In many of these instances, the Senator or Congressman will ask the Forest Service for assistance in replying to their constituents.

The Forest Service is sometimes requested to draft legislation for a member of Congress. These requests are made when the member wishes to introduce legislation on a given subject and the Forest Service has the technical expertise and experience to provide the service.

The legislative affairs activities of the Forest Service I&E program are especially significant in the Eastern Region because of the large population and associated numbers of Senators and Representatives.

The Information-Education Challenge

An example of the Forest Service I&E program is provided by a brief review of actions to meet the requirements of the Forest Rangeland and Renewable Resources Planning Act.

This law, enacted in August 1974 (commonly referred to as the Resources Planning Act) directed that an assessment be made of the Nation's renewable resources. It also directed that, based on the assessment, a program be developed for managing the National Forests. The law stipulated that the assessment be updated every ten years and the program every five years. Both documents must project forty years into the future. The first assessment and program will be submitted to Congress early in 1976.

In total, the Forest Service requested input from the public on three occasions. First, an outline for developing the assessment and program was provided to the public for review and comment. Input was needed at this stage to ensure that the final documents dealt sufficiently with all aspects of National Forest System programs.

Based upon input received on the outline, the public was furnished a draft of proposed alternative goals to be incorporated in the program document. Again, input was needed to ensure that a full range of alternatives were considered in developing National Forest System programs.

Finally, in August 1975, the draft assessment and program documents were given wide public distribution for review and comment. The drafts were a blend of previous public input and professional management considerations. Both were necessary to meet the requirements of the Resources Planning Act.

Throughout the period of public involvement, the Forest Service made every effort to gain as much public input as possible. Periodic news releases were published announcing the availability of the materials for review and the need for public participation. Forest Service personnel at all levels of the organization took advantage of opportunities to include the subject in presentations and personal contacts. Personnel made numerous appearances on television and radio interview programs. Letters were written and paid newspaper advertisements were placed in the major newspapers. During September, public hearings were held across the Nation.

Following the public involvement, the documents were redrafted, reflecting the public input. The assessment and program that will ultimately be submitted to Congress will be strong testimony that the public does indeed play an active role in charting the management of our National Forests. The program selected by Congress from among the alternatives submitted will place the management of our National Forests on a long-term basis. Decisions reached today will affect future generations and management programs. I&E played an essential role in meeting the requirements of the Resources Planning Act.

The Forest Service, from its beginning, has been looked upon as a protector and custodian of the Nation's vast National Forest System. More recently, it has also been called upon to manage the System to produce increasing outputs of natural resource commodities and amenities. These demands, often conflicting, must be met from a finite land base.

The agency has always endeavored to manage the National Forest System on a scientific, professional basis. In carrying out its charge, the agency has not always, however, had the understanding of the public. In addition, failure to involve the public during the decision-making process in some instances has led to major conflicts. It is clear today that the public must be kept both informed and involved if the National Forest System is to continue to provide the goods and services which are vital to the Nation.

Just how well the public and the Forest Service can work together won't be known for many years. Our efforts today appear to be the most viable approach.