

# NATION

Sunday, May 28, 1995

## Forest Service panel wants new definition of 'family'

### Proposal would include agency's homosexual couples

By Joyce Price  
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

A U.S. Forest Service task force is urging the agency to adopt a "more inclusive definition of family" that would recognize persons "related by marriage, blood or affinity" and would include same-sex relationships.

The broader definition was recommended in a report by a "multicultural" agency panel that examined ways to assist the Forest Service work force in "balancing career and personal needs."

The task force found that "relationships that employees regard as 'family' are personal, varying from person to person."

It then recommended redefining family, "unless otherwise defined by law or regulation," to include persons of like "affinity whose relationships create, maintain and promote the social, mental, physical, emotional, spiritual and financial well-being of each member."

After the report's release, Forest Service chief Jack Ward Thomas sent a memorandum to all 31,600 agency employees, stating that the task force's recommendations on ways to make life easier for employees with families "reflect the needs of the agency and those of the work force."

Mr. Thomas urged employees to "accept and adopt these recommendations as you continue on your reinvention [of government] journey."

"The transformation of the Forest Service culture . . . is the most important strategy for assuring success for the FS becoming an employer of choice," he said.

As for the task force's proposal for a "more inclusive definition of family," Mr. Thomas said the Department of Agriculture "is currently considering the same question . . . and when that policy is in place, we will use a definition of family that is consistent with that

policy."

But Judy Kissinger, a Forest Service employee who is opposed to the proposed redefinition, said she's been told by a female member of the task force that the new policy is "already in place" at the Forest Service. She declined to identify the panel member.

Beth Barrett, spokeswoman for the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, hailed the efforts being made by the Forest Service and the Agriculture Department to redefine the family. "The whole concept of redefining the family is at the forefront of the gay and lesbian movement. . . . Statistically, we're no longer an 'Ozzie and Harriet' world," she said.

Bob Maginnis, a policy analyst with the Family Research Council who learned of the task force's findings from disgruntled Forest Service workers, expressed outrage that the agency is giving serious thought to changing the traditional definition of family.

"Any time we redefine family to include couples of the same gender and couples who are not married, we are radically altering the moral landscape of this country," he said.

"It chills the whole effort of government and culture to turn back to a sounder and more pure way of life. And if the federal government is going to redefine family to mean anything you want it to, it will be contributing to a dismantling of the nation, and we'll never be able to return to stability."

Mrs. Kissinger said "scores" of employees wrote to the task force and Mr. Thomas, urging that the language calling for a broader definition of family be kept out of the final version of the panel's report.

She added that critics of the report fear that official federal recognition of same-sex "domestic partners" as a family unit could ultimately lead to their qualifying for health insurance, life insur-

ance and other benefits now provided for married heterosexual couples.

The homosexual lover of a federal employee cannot at this time qualify for federal health insurance. Regulations governing such benefits define family members as the employee's spouse and unmarried dependent children under age 22, older unmarried children incapable of self-support, and grandchildren financially dependent on the employee.

But the Federal Employees Family Friendly Act, signed into law by President Clinton last October, permits a federal worker to use sick leave to attend to the medical needs of a "family member" and defines family member as "any individual related by blood or affinity whose close association with the employee is the equivalent of a family relationship."

The Office of Personnel Management acknowledged that "family member" now includes same-sex domestic partners. "It's an effort to respond to the realities that federal employees face each and every day. . . . The key thing to remember is the government is getting out of the business of defining relationships," OPM spokeswoman Janice Lachance told the Federal Times.

For those wondering why the Forest Service "Balancing Career and Personal Needs Task Force" delved into controversial family issues, the panel cited a 1991 Forest Service report titled "Toward a Multicultural Organization," which found that families are "crucial to maintaining a productive and stimulated" work force.

Mrs. Kissinger said the 1991 report is the reason she and many other Forest Service employees are "suspicious" of the new task force report. The earlier report was "totally a homosexual agenda," she said. "And this report appears to be a continuation of the 1991 report."