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Release No. FS-0613

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USDA FOREST SERVICE MODIFIES SERVICE CONTRACTS TO IMPROVE HEALTH AND SAFETY OF CONTRACT EMPLOYEES

WASHINGTON, Jan. 5, 2006—U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service today announced new language to its service contracts that explicitly requires contractors to provide their employees with safety clothing and equipment.

The move, part of several changes to existing and new service contracts, makes agency contractors more aware of responsibilities concerning the health and safety of employees. It also reemphasizes the Forest Service's commitment to protecting workers, some of whom are foreign, migrant workers performing tree planting, brush clearing and other types of forestry work.

"We care about the health and safety of all people who visit and work in national forests. They deserve the best protection we can give them," said Forest Service Chief Dale Bosworth. "I expect this action to improve worker health and safety across the board."

The new contract language comes from various existing laws, such as the Migrant and Seasonal Workers Protection Act (MSWPA), and will be inserted into new and existing service contracts. For example, a clause from the MSWPA informs contractors of requirements for ensuring safe transportation.

Adding the language directly into the service contracts is expected to produce two major results: increase the minimum threshold of knowledge for agency contract inspectors; and provide greater ability to hold contractors accountable by enforcing language in contracts.

Until now, applicable clauses were included in service contracts only via reference or only in general terms. By adding specific requirements directly into contracts, Forest Service contracting officers and contractors can be more alert to shortcomings and take immediate steps to remedy them. Writing the requirements directly into contracts also gives the Forest Service greater latitude to suspend or cancel contracts if contract language is violated rather than simply reporting the violations to another regulatory agency.

The Forest Service is going even further to ensure migrant, seasonal workers are properly housed, protected and compensated. In November, Chief Bosworth issued a formal letter requesting contract violations be reported to the appropriate oversight agency. The Chief called for contract administrators to be able to recognize health and safety violations and take immediate action to correct them.

According to the letter, all violations must be documented and will be a factor in

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evaluating future bids and awarding future contracts. The agency is also working with the Office of Safety and Health Administration to develop additional safeguards.

The Forest Service has several hundred contracts nationwide for forestry-type work. Many of the contractors often hire foreign workers on H-2B visas.

For a copy of the new contract language, visit www.fs.fed.us.

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