

USGS turmoil: Fired employees rehired, triggering more layoffs

Country
Almanac
7/3/96

By MARION SOFTKY

The agony at the U.S. Geological Survey in Menlo Park goes on — and on.

Just as the world's premier earth science research institution was dedicating a new building and trying to move positively into the future, the turmoil of the past year came back to haunt it.

Five of the 158 people who were laid off locally in last October's RIF (reduction in force) are being reinstated after appealing their dismissal. Two more are being restored to lower-level jobs and are still appealing.

In response to the reinstatements, the USGS in Menlo Park has handed out 60-day RIF notices to three more employees and downgraded another.

At least 50 more appeals of people who lost their jobs at USGS in Menlo Park are still pending with the federal Merit System Protection Board. They should be decided at hearings in October, if not before.

Nationwide, more than 100 appeals are still alive.

Attorneys for one group of 36 who filed a joint appeal were jubilant. "The five successful cases are the first wave of more than 100 challenges brought by employees against the USGS in the largest reduction in force in the history of the agency," trumpeted a press release from PEER (Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility), which helped with the case.

Dean Anderson, personnel director for the USGS Western Region in Menlo Park, denied that the reinstatement was a victory for the appellants. When new information indicated the layoff was incorrect, "We corrected the situation," he said. "We found cases that changed the decision."

PEER identified three of the people being reinstated:

- Stephen Wolf of Skyline, who blew the whistle on mismanagement of an expensive research vessel. His job description had been altered, without his knowledge, to eliminate him from consideration for several positions.

- Michael Fischer of Menlo Park, who reported improprieties in the Pacific Marine Geology Branch.

- Edwin "Ted" McKee of Palo Alto, who was improperly denied his position due to falsification of the incumbent's position description.

Also being reinstated are Edward Mankinen and Guy Cochrane. Russ Evarts and Gretchen Leupke are being given lower-level jobs.

The two sides disagreed on what

they think will happen with the rest of the appeals. Mr. Anderson said he did not expect more reinstatements. Mary Dryovage, attorney for the group appeal, said: "For them to say this isn't a defeat is ridiculous. I think their case is completely crumbling."

USGS response

Whatever the legalities, the new round of layoffs has further devastated the morale of a once-proud research organization.

To make room for the returnees, Mr. Anderson explained, new people had to be laid off; they were selected by the same process used in the original RIF: "We reran the RIF."

At a recent "all-hands" meeting to explain the new organization, many questions were blunt and bitter. "Does this mean that as someone comes in the door, someone goes out the door?" asked one observer.

"Possibly yes," Mr. Anderson replied.

The personnel earthquake that hit USGS last fall saw 158 people from the Geologic Division in

Menlo Park lose their jobs; another 62 were demoted or reassigned.

All were from the Geologic Division, which carries the USGS's basic research in earthquakes, landslides, volcanoes, minerals, oceans and planets. Thus one fourth of the division's workers were out the door Oct. 14. If demotion and transfer are included, one-third of the workers in the division suffered a personal upheaval.

The other divisions, studying water resources and producing maps, were unaffected.

The reorganization shifts the focus of the Geologic Division and changes the organization from a box-type organization with traditional chain-of-command management to mission-oriented teams. The new emphasis is less on basic understanding of the processes that affect the earth and more on customer service and specific missions.

At the all-hands meeting, Bill Normark, acting chief geologist of the Western Region, called 1996 a transition year. "Things are not working well yet," he admitted.

After noting the RIF and reor-

(Continued on next page)

'Major step forward,' says director of USGS at dedication of building

For the first time, Menlo Park has an official federal building.

On a sunny Friday morning the Menlo-Atherton Jazz band played and five members of the Naval Air Reserve Santa Clara Color Guard presented the flags at the dedication of the big building that has been under construction for two years beside Middlefield Road on the campus of the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) in Menlo Park.

Now the Vincent E. McKelvey Federal Building houses the 300,000 volume Earth Sciences Library, the largest in the western United States, as well as offices and laboratories of the Division of Water Resources. Other activities in the building include geologic mapping, volcano hazards research, marine and coastal studies, and oil and gas resource assessment.

"We're taking a major step forward," said Dr. Gordon Eaton, national head of the agency whose motto is "Earth Science in the public interest."

Dr. Eaton listed some of the new programs the Survey is undertaking, such as four new volcano observatories in the Aleutian Islands. "These are crucial and vital to keep our air lanes open," he said.

Menlo Park Mayor Bob Burmeister noted that USGS is a partner with Menlo Park in studying the ground water aquifer underlying the city.

The 96,700-square-foot, \$42 million building was authorized by Congress in 1991, long before the Republican revolution and Contract with America threatened the very existence of the USGS. The building represents long-term savings, say USGS officials, because the library and many of the water resource facilities have been occupying expensive leased space.

Scientists, many of whom have been working in trailers or laboratories not specifically designed for their work, have now moved into the modern building with state-of-the-art equipment.

Office windows are square, laboratory windows are round, says Public Affairs Officer Pat Jorgenson as she led a tour last Friday. Corridor walls look like warm brown tile, but are actually recycled waste lumber. Embedded in the floors are decorative brass oak leaves — in memory of the two trees that had to be cut down for the building. However eight oaks were saved, Ms. Jorgenson noted.

The main entrance to the building at 345 Middlefield Road leads to the library, which is open to the public from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. weekdays.

The building is named in honor of Vincent E. McKelvey, the ninth director of USGS, who joined it in 1941 and worked there until his death in 1987.

USGS turmoil over layoffs

Continued from previous page)

gанизation had been followed by a government closure, a blizzard that shut down the East, and delayed funding that was only just arriving, he added, "It is not appropriate to judge the new structure on the basis of what's happened so far."

At least 60 of the laid-off, or "riffed," employees in Menlo Park have filed appeals. They claim the RIF illegally targeted individuals rather than positions, that women in research and technical positions were disproportionately affected, and 85 managers kept jobs. Whistle-blowers also got the ax, they claim.

"I'm targeted. I'm a whistle-blower. Most of us are targeted," said Mr. Wolf, a 29-year veteran of USGS who is now building trails and trimming poison oak for the Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District.

Mr. Anderson denied that individuals were targeted in the RIF. "It's untrue and unfounded," he said. "Our policy has always been that if we found we had overlooked information in the original RIF decision process, we would correct the decision."

RIF and reorganization

One of the basic problems, several scientists said, was that the RIF took place at the same time a new director was totally reorganizing the Geologic Division. Thus decisions on whom to lay off were based on new and very specific job classifications that had not been tested. "We see that as a real problem," said Leda Beth Gray, a laid-off geologist who also feels she was targeted as a whistle-blower.

"Scientists need to be in an environment with free exchange of ideas and a lot of support from management," said Ms. Gray. "When targeting's going on, it's not a safe environment any more. It would affect the whole organization and the science done in it."

Mr. Anderson defended com-

binning the RIF and reorganization. "It is a good thing to accomplish two things that are difficult and not extend the pain," he said.

He also defended the narrow job classifications that are under fire from appellants who felt they were excluded from jobs for which they were qualified. "Research jobs are so unique," he said. "In a research lab each person is working on a different project."

Another sore point was that the RIF was based on a "worst-case

The new round of layoffs has further devastated morale at a once-proud research agency.

scenario" of a 20 percent budget cut — which didn't materialize. Chet Wrucke of Portola Valley, another of the appellants, said: "The budget actually increased some. That's part of the irony."

Some jobs were actually added back when last year's budget was adopted, Mr. Anderson replied. "It's likely there would have been even more cuts if the budget had been cut," he said.

Mr. Anderson added that management has to look at the long-term funding situation. "This is prudent management," he said. "It's not a very optimistic outlook for the long term."

Howard Wilshire, a leader in the appeal and a well-known whistle-blower, expects more reinstatements. "My purpose is to overturn the RIF," he said. "If we accomplish that goal, we will save a lot of other agencies the problems in down-sizing."

Dr. Wilshire got into hot water with the agency by calling attention to damage by off-road vehicles in the Mojave Desert, and questioning the safety of the proposed nuclear disposal site in Ward Valley.

Personal toll

Within the organization, layoffs become very personal.

Brett Cox has received a 60-day layoff notice — and gone through its attendant agonies — twice.

A field geologist who has done mapping in Central and Southern California in relation to earthquake hazards and ground water contamination, he got his first RIF notice last August. Dr. Wrucke, a senior scientist with 43 years at the USGS was given the chance to bump his

Dr. Wrucke didn't have the head to displace a younger man with family; he took retirement instead.

Now Ted McKee has been reinstated, pushing out another scientist, who is now taking Mr. Cox's position.

Mr. Cox is one year from being eligible for early retirement. In an understatement, he says, "It's an emotional roller coaster to have happen twice."

Every case produces individual pain, sometimes involving several people.

Mr. Wolf, a 29-year veteran with the survey, is not happy to be going back to work — and not just because he is going back into the same situation that had gone sour for him. To get a job back, he is having to bump a friend, a middle-aged man with a family, who is "devastated — and is no longer a friend.

"I'm not happy to go back to work. It hurts; it's devastating; it's a nightmare," he said. "But I need the money."

These personal agonies have deeply damaged the 117-year-old agency that prided itself as being the "improbable bureaucracy," a model science agency. "The worst thing is the loss of morale and loyalty," said Ms. Gray. "We used to be like a family, such a productive creative organization."

Toward the end of the all-hands meeting, geologist and moderator David Howell said, "I agree with much that has been said, but life goes on. I hope the RIF will end real quickly. But that's not the end of uncertainty."