

Texas Forest Service Employee Advisory Council
Minutes From
April 14, 2004

Members Attending:

Eric Beckers	Nick Harrison	Sarah Brooks	Jarrett Robinson
Jill Lipsey	Sylvia Becerra	Debbie Allman	
Paula Cadena	Daniel Duncum	Ronnie Hamm	
Steve Anderson	Richard Dottellis	Donna Valentine	
Linda Alford	Brad Moore	Bobby Weaver, Jr.	

Members Absent with Notification: None

Members Absent without Notification: None

Ex-Officio Members Present:

Tom Owen Don Cumbie Tom Boggus

Daniel Duncum, EAC Chair, called the EAC meeting to order at 9am.

1. **Approval of minutes from February EAC Meeting:** A motion was made and seconded and the minutes from the February EAC meeting were approved by unanimous vote. (Minutes attached)
2. **Approval of Bylaws Changes:** A motion was made and seconded and the bylaws were approved by unanimous vote. (Bylaws attached)
3. **Discussion Items:**
 - a. **Survey of Organizational Excellence:** Tom Owen presented an overview of the results from the recent Survey of Organizational Excellence. The EAC felt the best way to communicate the survey results is through the chain of command. [Initially Tom will brief each of the East Texas Regional Forester staff meetings and request each District Forester return and brief their district.](#) Key points from the survey include:
 - i. We had a response rate of 61%--significant improvement over our 41% response rate in 2001-2002.
 - ii. Out of 20 categories (constructs), we received positive scores (>300) in 18.
 - iii. The two categories receiving a low score were Fair Pay and Internal (Communications)

- iv. The two categories with the largest reductions, as compared to the 2001-2002 survey, were Fair Pay and Benefits. The lower rating with benefits is understandable given the increased costs and decreased services we have experienced with our group insurance plans during the past few years.
 - v. With organizations such as the EAC and the TFS Communications Council, the Agency is taking action to address employee concerns

- b. **Holiday/Overtime Pay:** The EAC reviewed an email from Bill Fox explaining TAMU System and TFS policy regarding overtime and holiday pay. (Attached) Several employees had expressed concern over holiday pay. [The email clarified the policy and EAC members can follow-up with those employees who have concerns.](#)

- c. **Benefit Update/Forecast:** Joe Pase and Don Cumbie presented an overview of our benefit programs. Key points of their overview include:
 - i. Expect out of pocket costs to increase.
 - ii. State contribution will probably not increase.
 - iii. Medical costs increasing by 13%-19% a year.
 - iv. TAMU System is looking at joining ERS for health benefits- must make a decision by November 2004.
 - v. Eckerd's has been bought by CVS---impact of this acquisition to us is unknown.

- d. **Internal Communications:** The EAC engaged in a discussion on how to best communicate its actions with the Agency and how employees want to receive communications. In general, EAC members felt that email is the best method to communicate information to employees. Email, however, must be supplemented by bulletin board postings, regular mail, TFS website, and employee meetings.

- e. **Pay Issues:** Several pay issues were raised by employees. The issues fell into several categories: Tenure pay, pay gaps between administrative, emergency response and management personnel, and the merit pay process.
 - i. **Pay for Tenure:** The council felt strongly that employees should not receive compensation solely on tenure. They felt that longevity pay compensates an employee for tenure. Tom Boggus shared with the Council that the East Texas

leadership group is developing a career ladder plan. He stated that tenure would be a component of that plan, but competence would be the primary driver. Eventually career ladders will be developed for all positions in the Agency.

- ii. Pay Gaps: The career ladder plan should help address this issue as well as compare our jobs with the “market” to determine where we have internal or external equity issues.
- iii. Merit Pay Process: Concern has been raised by employees that the first line supervisor is not the primary person responsible for the recommendation of pay raises. The EAC felt that any merit pay pool should be available to the lowest possible level. [The Council decided to have the Chair prepare a letter for the Executive Team articulating the issue and recommending increased involvement and authority by the first line supervisor in the merit pay process.](#)

f. **Flexible Work Schedules**: The EAC discussed “flextime” and the four, ten-hour day concept.

- i. Flextime: The Agency currently allows employees to use flextime with supervisor approval. No real issue here.
- ii. Four, ten-hour days: The issue here revolves around productivity and being available to our customers. Some offices would not be able to allow employees to work “four 10’s” because either the office is too small to allow a four day work week or the competencies required are not spread among enough employees to allow some employees to only work 4 days. Other issues center around the secretarial staff and the College Station group not being able to accommodate a four day work week. Some offices, however, might be able to work “four 10’s” for periods of time and continue to serve our customer. The Council felt those offices able to implement a 4-day work week, even for brief periods, should see an increase in morale among employees. [The Council decided to have the Chair prepare a letter for the Regional Foresters and the West Texas RFC’s encouraging the use of flexible work schedules, when appropriate, and acknowledging the challenge to supervisors, especially during fire season.](#)

g. **Uniform Allowance**: The EAC discussed a recommendation from an employee that boots be added to the list of items able to be purchased with the uniform allowance.

- i. The EAC agreed that adding boots to the uniform allowance list would be a positive thing, however, employees must always present themselves in a clean and serviceable uniform. Purchasing boots cannot come at the expense of their uniforms. Most likely, employees will have to build up an inventory of uniforms before spending a large portion of their annual uniform allowance toward boots.
 - ii. [Ronnie Hamm will contact Lion Apparel to see what types of boots they have, if any. If Lion Apparel can support us, the Council decided to have the Chair prepare a letter to the Executive Team requesting the addition of boots to the uniform allowance.](#)
- h. **Consistent Policies:** Employees raised concerns about Agency policies regarding pagers (emergency response) and parking/use of TFS vehicles.
 - i. **Pagers:** The EAC discussed a concern raised by an employee that some emergency responders do not respond appropriately when paged after normal work hours. The feeling is that some employees do not understand our policy regarding actions required when paged. [The Council decided to have the Chair send a letter to the Chief Regional Foresters requesting that the pager policy be spelled out in a written procedure/guideline.](#)
 - ii. **TFS Vehicles:** The EAC discussed a concern raised by an employee regarding TFS employees parking state vehicles at VFD's in order to not have to drive personal vehicles long distances to and from their residences. The feeling by some employees is this policy may not be uniformly understood or administered. [The Council decided to have the Chair send a letter to the Executive Team requesting this policy be clarified in a written procedure/guideline.](#)
- i. **Use of Seasonal Employees:** An employee raised the concern that seasonal employees were being used inappropriately i.e. grounds maintenance and as dispatcher on low fire probability days. [After discussion the Council decided to have the Chair send a letter to the Chief Regional Foresters detailing the concern.](#)

- j. **Certified Forester**: An employee raised a concern that “certified forester” status should not be tied to performance evaluation. Tom Boggus reiterated the Director’s expectation that all foresters actively seek certified forester status. The Council decided to not take any action regarding this issue.

8. **Action Items**: The Chair will prepare correspondence as follows:

- a. Email to Regional Foresters requesting agenda time for Tom Owen to present results of the Survey of Organizational Excellence.
- b. Letter to Executive Team concerning the merit pay process.
- c. Letter to Regional Foresters and West Texas RFC’s concerning flexible work schedules.
- d. Letter to Chief Regional Foresters concerning the pager policy.
- e. Letter to Executive Team concerning vehicle use policy.
- f. Possible letter to Executive Team regarding addition of boots to uniform allowance (pending research by Ronnie Hamm).
- g. Letter to Chief Regional Foresters expressing concern over possible inappropriate use of seasonal employees.

9. **Next Meeting Date**:

- a. **Jul 14, 2004**—Lufkin, 9am-4pm
- b. **Oct 13, 2004**—location TBD
- c. **January 12, 2005**—location TBD

10. The meeting was adjourned at 3pm.