

USFS pulls plan to spend \$10M on image

By Jeff Barnard
Associated Press

GRANTS PASS (AP) — Faced with a backlash from current and retired employees, the U.S. Forest Service has abruptly dropped plans to spend up to \$10 million on a five-year nationwide public relations campaign to brand itself as a public agency that cares about people and nature.

Without giving a reason, the Forest Service issued a statement Tuesday saying that it had not accepted any contract bids and would look for other ways to enhance the public's access to national forests and understanding about what the agency does. Spokesman Larry Chambers would not answer questions.

The agency has been facing an intense public backlash in the West over plans to close trails and roads to motorized vehicles due to a lack of money for maintenance, as well as to prevent erosion and protect fish and wildlife.

But a watchdog group and current and retired Forest Service employees had raised concerns that money would be better spent on the ground, instead of trying to enhance the agency's image, while it struggles to pay to fight wildfires, maintain roads and trails, and offer timber sales.

Andy Stahl, director of the watchdog group Forest Service Employees for Environmental Ethics, said he thought the agency's leaders "finally listened to Forest Service employees, and no one thought this was a good idea."

Stahl said that after he

learned of the contract, he sent an email to 25,000 Forest Service employees, and about half of them opened it. He got about 50 replies, all critical, suggesting the money could be put to better use on recreation programs, revising forest management plans, restoring ecosystems, hiring employees and lifting a three-year wage freeze.

Jim Golden, a retired deputy regional forester for the Northwest and board chairman for the National Association of Forest Service Retirees, said he warned Forest Service Chief Tom Tidwell in an email Saturday of the "growing firestorm" among retirees unless the agency released information explaining the campaign. But Tidwell never did, Golden said.

"Our primary reaction was one of suspicion," he said. "Not many retirees believe the Forest Service needs a new brand. Most of us believe the simple (motto), 'Caring for the land and serving the people,' is pretty effective."

Rep. Peter DeFazio, D-Ore., said he was happy the Forest Service changed its mind so the money could be put to more "pressing needs."

Al Matecko, retired chief of public and legislative affairs for the Northwest region and head of the Old Smokeys group, which represents about 950 retirees, said he received 50 emails from members who were strongly opposed. He passed on those objections to Forest Service leaders.

"Retirees were just amazed that at this time of shrinking budgets, the Forest

Service could find \$10 million," he said.

Last fall, the agency awarded a \$526,799 no-bid contract to Metropolitan Group of Portland, Oregon, for a branding campaign titled "Valuing People and Place" in Forest Service regions covering Oregon, Washington, southern Idaho, Utah, Wyoming and Nevada, according to the federal website FedBizOpps.gov. It was the only no-bid contract issued by the U.S. Department of Agriculture out of more than 3,000.

Another federal website, USAspending.gov, shows the Forest Service has paid Metropolitan Group \$3.6 million since 2011, much of it for the Valuing People and Place campaign.

The campaign focused on areas where the Forest Service has faced public backlash to plans to close roads and trails to motorized traffic.

Metropolitan Group's Portland office did not return a phone message seeking comment. Its website describes the company's work for the Forest Service as helping it reflect on its roots and discover its future.

The Forest Service filed notice Nov. 28 that it was soliciting bids to expand the campaign nationwide at a cost of up to \$10 million over five years. Bids closed Dec. 29. A week later, it announced it was not accepting any bids.

"It's called the 'Take out the trash season,'" said Stahl, the watchdog group leader. "It's when government does things it doesn't want people to know about."

Sisters restaurant announces major change

The owners of one of Sisters' most highly regarded restaurants have announced a major change coming this spring.

In a letter to friends and customers, Jennifer and TR McCrystal reported that Jen's Garden will close at the end of February and transition into a breakfast-lunch café.

"As of mid-April, Jen's Garden will reopen as The Cottonwood Café — a breakfast and lunch restaurant serving a menu of creative, affordable, high-quality, house-created fare," they wrote. "The atmosphere will be casual, the food fantastic and the environment welcoming to all. In addition, we will offer occasional wine dinners, special event evenings and be available for both private parties and fundraising events."

The restaurateurs noted that they wanted to make their dining experience accessible.

"Our initial vision was that

Jen's Garden would be a little cottage where guests could gather for exceptionally good food, sourced locally when possible, prepared with skill and creativity and accessible to anyone wanting a high-quality culinary experience," they wrote. "What we have seen over the years is that Jen's Garden has become a 'special event destination.' While we are happy to offer a lovely meal in a beautiful environment, we did not set out to become exclusive or a place mainly frequented for special occasions. We wanted to be accessible and our food enjoyed by many."

Creation of The Cottonwood Café, they believe, will meet that goal.

"We look at this as an opportunity to hand-create yet another dining option in our beautiful small town," they said.

Jen's Garden is located at 403 E. Hood Ave. For information call 541-549-2699.

An intimate cottage offering a Southern France inspired dining experience.



Open Wednesday through Sunday beginning at 5 p.m.
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www.jensgardenmenu.com

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