

Statement of Congressman Doug Collins (R-GA)
Testimony before HASC — Camp Merrill Land Transfer

April 9, 2014

Chairman McKeon, Ranking Member Smith, I appreciate the opportunity to testify before your committee this morning.

Words cannot express how proud I am at having in my district, one-third of the famed U.S. Army Ranger School. The 5th Ranger Training Battalion is located in the beautiful and mountainous Dahlonega, Georgia, home also to America's first gold rush, but I am not here to discuss that today.

Camp Frank D. Merrill, located on 282 acres of land, houses the Mountain Phase of Ranger School. The camp is comprised of 200 active duty soldiers, a dining facility, PX, commissary, chapel and mountaineering equipment.

Most importantly Camp Merrill houses over 200 soon to be Rangers who are deprived of food, sleep and comforting amenities in order to be the best our country has to offer as a fighting force.

After World War II the U.S. Army leased the 282 acre tract of land from the U.S. Forest Service in order to construct the second phase of Ranger School. A 1951 Army-USFS Special Use Permit was drafted and the Army has operated on the land under the supervision of USFS since then.

The Special Use Permit has enacted two layers of business rules and operating procedures for Camp Merrill - one Army layer and one Forest Service layer. The duplicative nature of management causes delays on critical infrastructure projects and unnecessarily complicates day-to-day operations.

Ranger School's operational tempo and mission at Camp Merrill is an understandable unique one. The Army's mission at Camp Merrill requires very specific building and maintenance standards calling for exemptions to regulatory guidance, guidance for which the Army already has standing operation procedures in place for.

Once approvals for exemptions are processed through military channels, the Forest Service then vets any changes to Camp Merrill structures.

This happens at an increased cost to U.S. taxpayers.

The goal in acquiring Camp Merrill for the Army is to increase efficiency and save tax payer's money. Wholly owning Camp Merrill allows any needed structural improvements and Ranger training facilities upgrades to occur cheaper than operating under two levels of bureaucracy.

One example of bureaucratic senselessness is when a group of trees surrounding a landing zone for helicopters started to cause a safety hazard and needed trimming.

Due to the two level approval process of structural and environmental changes required by dual management of Camp Merrill, two years went by before approval was granted to trim the trees within an acre and a half area. In addition to the protracted time to accomplish a simple task, the cost for trimming the trees nearly doubled.

While we are on cost, this bureaucratic redundancy is occurring at a period when DOD is looking to capitalize on savings.

The last nine projects the Army built at Camp Merrill cost \$674,980 more due to repeated and unnecessary oversight by the US Forest Service.

While this may appear to be a miniscule amount of money, remember a redundant approval process can be traced back over 50 years.

My legislation reverses decades of redundant oversight and enacts a land exchange between the Dept. of Army and U.S. Forest Service.

The exchange allows the Army to gain administrative control of Camp Merrill and USFS gets new lake front property at Lake Lanier in Georgia.

For over twenty years the two agencies engaged in several rounds of negotiations to enact a land transfer. As recent as 2012, language was inserted into the NDAA to bring about this long needed change.

At the last moment, the language was stripped out because the Dept. of Agriculture reneged on the deal by asking for \$10 million in addition to the land on Lake Lanier. The Army was not able to provide the money, as it was not part of the originally mutually decided upon agreement.

2014 is the year this saga comes to an end. With the passage of this language the Army is empowered to build the structures needed to train one of this country's most elite fighting forces.

In addition tax payers are relieved of duplicative agency oversight and the U.S. Forest Service gains access to land it previously didn't own.

Mr. Chairman, ranking member, thank you for your time.