

TESTIMONY OF DENICE RICE
BEFORE THE COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND GOVERNMENT REFORM
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
EXAMINING SEXUAL HARASSMENT AND GENDER DISCRIMINATION AT THE U.S.
DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

December 1, 2016

Chairman Chaffetz, Ranking Member Cummings, and members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me here today to testify.

My name is Denice Rice. I work for the USDA, Forest Service, Region 5, California. I have worked in the fire organization for twenty years. I have worked on the Eldorado National Forest in fire for fifteen years. I am a Fire Prevention Technician. I really love my job, but I have witnessed females being overlooked, not taken seriously, passed over, and not given equal opportunities. This has also happened to me. Our agencies have provided protection for the perpetrators, (promoting or moving them) and victims are left with little or no relief. Many female firefighters are treated differently than the male firefighters for assignments, training, promotions, and working conditions. Women who report sexual harassment are retaliated against. It is your word against his and you know the moment you open your mouth to speak up you are committing career suicide. Zero tolerance is lip service when we know that the system is rigged against women for reporting sexual harassment or assault.

It was widely known that my second line supervisor was a bully, abusive, and a womanizer to female employees for years and nobody did anything about it. Women were afraid to complain and the one who did report him ended up leaving the agency. He was never held accountable for his actions.

From 2009 through 2011 my second line supervisor repeatedly sexually harassed me and he assaulted me in 2011. I filed a complaint and the instant I filed everything changed. Management removed all of my supervisory responsibilities, moved me from my location, and isolated me. This

adverse action resulted in a prohibited personnel practice when they removed my supervisory responsibilities that were in my position description.

Numerous investigations were held. There was an OIG investigation, with interviews from multiple investigators and I had to relive the situation over and over. One of the investigators provided specific details to my peers on what the second line supervisor did to me, including sexual assault. I lost my reputation and my dignity when they made the situation public. My family life was affected. My husband felt helpless because he wasn't allowed to protect me. My life was a living hell. I was diagnosed with PTSD.

One example is the District Ranger called an “all hands” fire meeting to discuss what had happened and the investigations. Three times I begged not to attend the meeting. I was directed to go and when the District Ranger started discussing what happened to me, people turned and stared at me. I was on display. These peers were people I had known for years. I felt degraded and was humiliated. My perception was that I was being blamed for the disruption in the fire organization. I quickly left the meeting. I was shaking and in tears. There was talk of putting me on AWOL for leaving the meeting. By this time this situation was more traumatic to me than the assaults.

The agency protected my perpetrator. While he was under investigation he continued to supervise women, he was allowed to take agency-paid developmental training to promote his career, and was allowed to be acting District Ranger. The message was that he had done nothing wrong, and I was the problem. I kept hearing that he was entitled to due process, but it went beyond that.

After the OIG investigation and the Rangers read everything in the report, again violating my confidentiality, the decision was made to terminate him. But before they gave him the proposed removal letter, the Forest Supervisor took him out for coffee to give him advance notice that he was going to be fired. They let him quickly retire with no mark on his record whatsoever.

After his retirement he applied for and was hired on a California Incident Management Team. This put me in a situation where we could both be assigned to the same fire incident. It also allowed

him to continue working with women. He walked away clean from the Forest Service and got away with what he did to me. When I learned that I could run into him on a fire assignment, I felt they were putting me in a vulnerable situation and had no regard for my well-being. Rehiring this predator was a message to me and other employees that the agency did not feel he did anything wrong. I felt devalued and as if I didn't matter. It sent a message saying they do not value their female employees.

In 2016 the fire organization brought this predator back to the Eldorado forest specifically to give a motivational speech to the Hotshots. So they are still supporting him while I have continued to be harassed by the same individuals that protected him before he left. I have had to file additional reprisal complaints.

From working with the Coalition of Minority Employees and being a Class Agent for the female firefighter class action I know what happened to me happens to women all over the Region and Forest Service. As for retention and promotion, women in isolated work stations have to navigate “the boys club” which can be hostile, intimidating and unwelcoming, and women tend to quit or move on. Some can do well but others exposed to these oppressive conditions will not report, and the bad behavior culture persists and is enhanced because they feel a sense of reward, proud that they have been able to push women out and can boast they have no women on the crew.

In the future I hope the agency will honor women as equals in our work environment. Management needs to be proactive, not reactive. By the time management does something, it has been too late. Relationships are damaged, there is inability to regain trust, credibility is destroyed, and advancement is impossible. How many women do you know that have gone on to lead successful careers after reporting sexual harassment and hostile work environments. I don't know of any. People need to be held accountable for their actions.

Thank you. I would be glad to answer any questions you have.

/Denice Rice
Prevention Technician
Eldorado National Forest