

Sisters and brothers, and my fellow travelers in this journey, it was an honor to again serve as one of your representatives in Washington, DC, for our 2018 legislative effort. It was a good week and I am proud of the work accomplished by our team.

This was a particularly difficult year. Our plan to pursue strengthening support for HR 3303 as our primary effort was quickly reassessed when we learned of language in the president's proposed 2019 budget to sever the connection between USDA and our CCCs, and privatize them. The additional proposals to cut federal employee pay and benefits also came to the forefront.

We also faced attacks to our contract in the form of the Agency denying the travel to the conference for a significant number of attendees, as well as giving the incorrect information to some supervisors of our attendees, making approval of official time needlessly difficult.

Nevertheless, we persisted. For you; for all of us.

HR 3303/S 29

Imagine working in fire or law enforcement for several years – or even 1 day or week, being promised a fulfilling career that is acknowledged as arduous and hazardous by the assignment of a special accelerated retirement system. But then, one day on the job the unimaginable happens: you are injured in such a way that you can no longer perform the duties of the job you love, and the only placement in the Agency that is offered to you is a non 6c covered position which would cause you to lose the 6c benefit you were promised. The First Responder Fair RETIRE Act would fix this by allowing those firefighters and law enforcement personnel injured on the job and placed in non 6c covered positions to retain that retirement system.

We continued to gather support for these bills this week. In the House, the bill has been referred to the Oversight and Government Reform (OGR), Foreign Affairs, and Special Committee on Intelligence committees, so that's who we visited. And we were not the only groups on Capitol Hill carrying this bill. In the halls of the Rayburn building we ran into one of the 3 Federal Law Enforcement Officers Association (FLEOA) teams, also in the middle of their day of meetings. We also know we have the International Association of Fire Fighters (IAFF) and the FBI Agents Association on board as well.

The bill was reported out of OGR March 15, and could now come to the floor of the House for a vote. The week of May 14 was Police Week in Washington, DC. We had our fingers crossed that we would see movement then, but we did not. We will continue to work on this.

Civilian Conservation Centers (CCCs)

The 3 sentences in the Job Corps program budget are:

“The Budget proposes to end the US Department of Agriculture's (USDA) role in the Job Corps program. The 26 centers operated by USDA are overrepresented in the lowest performing cohort of centers, and workforce development is not a core agency role. The Budget proposes a General Provision that would allow the Department to competitively select a non-federal entity to operate the former USDA centers.”

Such a tiny piece of language, but with the potential to cause so much damage to the program, the students, and our brothers and sisters who work at our CCC centers. This became a parallel priority for us this week.

As this is a budgeting issue, we focused on appropriations committee members, but discussed in all our appointments. We continually heard that the proposed budget is “a wish list”, that not all in it will come to pass. Many offices we visited understand and support the mission of our CCCs. We must continue to educate the rest of the importance of our centers – to the students, to the communities they reside in, and to the mission of the Forest Service.

Federal Employee Pay and Benefits

The proposed presidential 2019 budget also holds rotten eggs for all federal employees in the form of proposals to reduce federal employee pay in several ways, as well as reducing federal employee benefits. This was further exacerbated the week we were in DC by a letter from the Director of OPM to House Speaker Paul Ryan, asking for legislation that would cut retirement programs for federal employees.

Proposals in the Proposed 2019 budget and OPM director Pon’s letter include:

- Eliminate the FERS supplement for those who retire before Social Security begins, at age 62
- Change from highest 3 to highest 5 years of pay for retirement annuity computations
- Increase employee FERS contribution 1%/year until all employees contribute 7.25% (current contributions range from .8 to 4.4% of salary), matching the government contribution
- Eliminate COLA for FERS retirees (current and future) and reduce CSRS COLAs by .5%
- Pay freeze in 2019
- Significant reduction of the TSP GFund rate of return

The message in our visits was that federal employees do vital work for the American people every day. Forest Service employees are out working their tails off everyday providing service to the American public in the form of multiple use management for timber, range, water, recreation and wildlife on our national forest land. We are tired of being scapegoated in the media, and by the administration and Congress. We deserve fair compensation and benefits to be maintained, not insults and threats.

HR 5389

The Federal Retirement Fairness Act was introduced by Rep Derek Kilmer (WA-06) in the House March 22, 2018. The bill would allow federal employees with temporary time after January 1, 1989, to “buy back” that temporary time, which would then allow it to be included in time worked towards retirement. Per the bill, employees would have to pay employee and government retirement contributions, plus interest, as determined by OPM.

Rep Kilmer sponsored this bill in answer to concerns from constituents working in Bremerton shipyards who upon reaching retirement age found temporary time they had worked before a permanent appointment was not counted toward their time in service for retirement. Many in the Forest Service empathize with this concern, with the potential of anywhere from 1 to 25 or 35 years of temporary service with the agency before being selected for their first permanent position with the Forest Service. Needless to say, there has been much interest in this bill amongst our bargaining unit.

While the Council was not prepared to carry this as a primary topic, I did talk with the staffer in Rep Kilmer's office who is handling the bill. One of the first steps taken in evaluating proposed language is receiving comments from relevant agencies. They have received comments from OPM which would indicate that the bill may not proceed much further during this session of Congress. BUT – should that happen, that gives the opportunity to make the language better for employees.

While the bill was introduced to help the shipyard workers in Rep Kilmer's district, many other groups of employees in the same situation have reached out (including us) as they heard of the bill. People are interested in this.

We will continue to watch this bill, and work for its passage.