

Why Is USDA Stripping the Forest Service of its Pine Tree Logo?

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As official badges go, the Forest Service's is pretty plain -- but very much to the point. At its center, a lone pine tree splits the letters U and S, letters that serve doubly to denote the U.S. Forest Service and the U.S. Department of Agriculture, organizations whose names are emblazoned across the top and bottom of the shield. It is a deft, clean, legible, and [historic symbol](#), having been the agency's central logo since its establishment in 1905. For many current and past employees, it is also a badge of honor, a reflection of their deep and abiding attachment to their one-time or present-day roles as stewards of America's national forests. So you'll understand if they get a little testy when someone proposes to mess with this sign of their lifelong devotion to the public good. That someone would be the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which is poised to wipe out all of its agencies' individual markers of identification. In January, it released what it calls its [Visual Standards Guide](#), a slick document that contains this critical phrase: "Agency logos are being phased out and

replaced with a standardized signature model to be adopted by all USDA agencies."

Goodbye, Pine Tree. Hello, Bland.

Just how insipid becomes clear when reading the department's description of its so-called signature model:

The USDA symbol is a graphic representation of the land -- the foundation of all agriculture -- and the Department's initials. The symbol's colors -- dark green and dark blue -- represent the essential elements of earth, air, and water. Together these elements comprise the symbol.

Now cast your eyes over the USDA logo itself -- what exactly does it evoke? Where? Who? Looking more closely at this generic landscape, can you spot anything missing? If you worked for the largest agency within USDA -- the Forest Service -- you might well be puzzled that nothing is growing in this stylized field of green and blue. You might also crack up at the cutting remark of one agency retiree, who lambasted the USDA symbol as "the ultimate example of permanent deforestation."

Not laughing is the upper echelon of the USDA hierarchy; after more than two years of planning, they're taking this aggressive rebranding quite seriously. Asserting that hitherto the "USDA symbol is the official and sole identity mark for the Department and all agency programs," Secretary Tom Vilsack and his staff have rolled out the dead-handed language of federal bureaucratese to justify their actions: "The USDA symbol will give consistent identity to the Department, increase public recognition of the value and wide range of USDA's products and services, and bring economy of scale to the production of visual information materials."

Given that the USDA oversees the homogenization of milk, is it any wonder that it wants to standardize it tens of thousands of employees spread out over more than 20 agencies? To make their uniforms uniform, to insist that all signage, vehicles, news releases, websites, social-media platforms, letterheads, envelopes, business cards, powerpoint presentations, certificates of merit -- right down to the smallest "event name cards," and table-tent cards -- conform to and are consistent with the rigorous set of departmental graphic standards.

To insure compliance, the department also has created an oversight office, whose head bears the august title of Director of Brand, Events, Exhibits, and Editorial Review Division (BEEERD). Amid the fiscal turmoil of sequestration, Secretary Vilsack & Co. appears strangely worried about appearances.

The department might instead want to think about the budget, the astonishing costs associated with repainting the Forest Service's vast fleet alone (not to say those vehicles that carry food inspectors, researchers, librarians, natural resource scientists, and a host of others on their daily rounds). They might also calculate the lesser but still substantial price tag for reprinting stationery, reissuing IDs, and redesigning logos, uniforms, and, yes, badges.

Touting up that bill with all the incidentals expenses is not easy. But David Govatski, a Forest Service retiree and co-author of a compelling new study, [Forests for the People: The Story of the Eastern National Forests](#), gives this very rough estimate:

Start with 30,000 employees of just the Forest Service and figure that they each have one Pine Tree Shield badge plus 8 uniform shirts and jackets with patches and a vehicle with two decals. The cost of replacing these 11 items is \$44 in material costs plus 4 hours of time replacing decals and patches at an average cost of \$20 including benefits. This would be \$122 in parts and labor times 30,000. That total is \$3,660,000 and adding a 10% cost over run margin would bring the overall branding effort price to just over 4 million dollars. The cost of lowered morale cannot be adequately determined.

Whatever the final total -- and it will be exponentially higher than Govatski's rough calculation -- it can only be described as a waste of taxpayers' money and an affront to the many USDA employees who have not had a cost-of-living wage increase for four years or more.



Wasted, too, is a lot of goodwill. For some former Forest Service employees, USDA's assertion of its corporate primacy is a callous rejection of the value and significance of their decades-long public service. The Pine Tree shield evokes the intensity of their emotional ties to the work and communities they served, a metal memento of their cross-generational responsibilities to care for the land and serve the people.

Others interpret the department's action as a bare-knuckle crackdown on agency independence and esprit de corps, a top-down demand for bottom-up conformity. Still others gloomily suspect that Vilsack's command heralds a department-wide reorganization that would merge the Forest Service, the Natural Resources Conservation Service, and like-minded agencies within Agriculture.

The Secretary's order seems so onerous that some are now wishing for what once was considered utterly heretical -- the transfer of the Forest Service to the Department of the Interior. Numerous politicians and presidents have threatened such a transfer in the past, a punitive move that countless Forest Service chiefs, starting with its first, Gifford Pinchot, have fought against tooth-and-nail. For such a hated end to become a fantasized exit strategy, well, that tells you something about the furor USDA has unleashed when it determined that its symbol "is the single most visible asset of our organization."

What is most puzzling about this fiasco is its timing. I don't simply mean the scandalous waste of resources, fiscal and human, at a moment when the federal budgetary cupboard is beyond bare. But rather the fact that each of the department's agencies -- and the Forest Service most of all -- is struggling to respond to the deep and pervasive challenges that climate change is bringing to the land and the lives that depend on it. Those on the ground and in Washington should be focused with a laser-like intensity on the climate-driven dilemmas we are facing (and will face). The last thing they need is to be distracted by top management's weird ambition to compel everyone to dress alike, present alike, represent alike.

Such uniformity makes more sense within an individual agency. Its personnel, after all, are dedicated to pursuing a particular mission; they have a shared, and evolving, history; and they might benefit from a consistent look that speaks to and reinforces their collective commitments and that has a certain appeal to and meaning for the public they serve. Because the Forest Service does not do the same work as the Natural Resources Conservation Service which does not do the same work as the Rural Utilities Service which does not do the same work as the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, does it make sense (or cents) to clothe them in the same garb, to cloak their work in anonymity?



It wouldn't even to Herbert Kaufman, whose canonical administrative study, *The Forest Ranger* (1960), is often critical of the Forest Service's internal and conformist dynamics. He understood better than Secretary Vilsack that the agency's "insigne -- the shield-shaped badge with the agency name and a tree emblazoned on it -- is a familiar and respected one the country over." It has helped set the organization and its personnel in "a class by themselves, accentuating its self-consciousness and corporate spirit," which he found exemplified in the term they utilized to describe who they worked for. Many public servants, "asked who their employer is, are likely to name 'the government,' or perhaps their department," Kaufman observed. "Forest Officers will almost

invariably respond, 'the Forest Service.'"

That's still true, a response that speaks to their enduring commitment to fighting fires, restoring watersheds and habitats, protecting endangered species, rebuilding trails, and managing 193 million acres of forests and grasslands. If the Pine Tree Badge helps them identify even more

closely with their principled and difficult work, then Secretary Vilsack should preserve this inspiring symbol rather than junk it, projecting that image and reality far into the future.

http://www.kcet.org/news/the_back_forty/commentary/golden-green/-as-official-badges-go.html