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COMPTROLLER GENERAL OF THE UNITED STATES
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20548

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RELEASED

JUL 8 - 1975

B-125053

The Honorable Don Bonker
House of Representatives

Dear Mr. Bonker:

At the December 19, 1974, request of former Congressman Wendell Wyatt and later discussions with your office, we are reporting on the proposed move of the St. Helens Ranger District headquarters from its location at Pine Creek in the Gifford Pinchot National Forest to Yale, Washington.

We reviewed available records at the Forest Service headquarters in Washington, D.C., and interviewed Forest Service officials at the headquarters office; the regional office in Portland, Oregon; the forest supervisor's office in Vancouver, Washington; and the district headquarters at Pine Creek, Washington. We discussed the report contents with Forest Service officials and considered their views in preparing this report and also obtained the views of some timber industry representatives.

Mr. Wyatt was concerned about the unnecessary expenditures of Federal funds to move a facility which he said had been moved several times in the last 10 to 15 years and the effect this move would have on the forest users.

RANGER DISTRICT REORGANIZATIONS

Forest Service officials told us that reorganizations of ranger districts occur periodically and are necessary to

- facilitate management of the districts' changing workloads,
- more effectively use personnel, and
- improve services to the forest users.

The ranger districts in the Gifford Pinchot National Forest have been reorganized and changed several times in the last 17 years. The facility at Pine Creek has served as a district headquarters since 1959.

In 1957 the Lewis River Ranger District headquarters was moved from the Lewis River Guard Station to Chelatchie

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because a hydroelectric project was being built on the old site. Headquarters for the Canyon Creek Ranger District was also located at Chelatchie. At that time Pine Creek was a work area for the Lewis River Ranger District.

In 1959 the Pine Creek office was constructed and the Lewis River Ranger District headquarters was moved there. In 1966 the districts were organized eliminating the Spirit Lake and Willard Ranger Districts. One of the districts was combined with the Canyon Creek Ranger District and renamed the St. Helens Ranger District with headquarters at Chelatchie. The Lewis River Ranger District was enlarged; its headquarters remained at Pine Creek. In 1972 the old St. Helens Ranger District was split and a portion was added to the Lewis River Ranger District. This became the new St. Helens Ranger District with headquarters at Pine Creek.

The St. Helens Ranger District facilities at Pine Creek consist of nine three-bedroom houses, two two-bedroom houses, three bunkhouses, a messhall, an office building, a warehouse, a washhouse, an oilhouse, a generator house, an equipment storage building, and five trailers. The Forest Service has estimated the facilities' present value at about \$380,000. The headquarters is primarily responsible for timber management, fire control, timber sales administration, and recreational management on the national forest. The district has two major work areas: Pine Creek is primarily concerned with timber activities and Spirit Lake is primarily concerned with recreational activities. The Spirit Lake area is serviced in the summer by Forest Service personnel who live there in Government-owned facilities.

As of March 1975, 27 employees were assigned to the St. Helens Ranger District; 12 lived at Pine Creek and 15 lived near Yale, Washington, about 23 miles from Pine Creek. (See enc. I.) During the summer months the number of employees at Pine Creek increases by about 30. These summer employees work on maintaining recreation sites, preparing timber sales, removing slash, and reforestation. Most of these summer employees live in bunkhouses at Pine Creek.

RELOCATION OF DISTRICT HEADQUARTERS

In 1971, when the Forest Service made a study to consider reorganizing the ranger districts in the Gifford Pinchot National Forest, they also considered moving the St. Helens Ranger District headquarters office. According to the study

report, the decision to retain the headquarters office at Pine Creek was

"* * * based primarily on service to the public in the future, cost in travel time and dollars for personnel traveling to and from the headquarters to work locations, and the cost of establishing an entire new site when the availability of funds is quite limited."

In addition, the Forest Service decided that no further capital improvements would be made at Pine Creek until a study or experience provided a better basis for a long-term decision.

The 1971 study recognized that the Cougar area would be a better location because it would have made the district headquarters more accessible to the general public. (See enc. I.) School facilities, telephone service, and commercial electric power would have been available and the cost of removing snow (about \$10,000 annually) from the road between Cougar and Pine Creek would have been eliminated.

In 1974 the forest supervisor initiated a Forest Service study to select alternative sites for the St. Helens Ranger District headquarters and cited the following reasons:

"The present location at Pine Creek is unsatisfactory from administrative and employee welfare standpoints. The station is remote without school or other community facilities. The road along Swift Reservoir (N-90) is subject to washout which leaves the station isolated. No telephone or commercial electrical service is available or is likely to become available within the next 10 years. It is next to impossible to recruit people for long term employment due to lack of schools and the remote location."

The study recommended three alternative locations (in order of preference): Yale, Woodland, and Chelatchie; 23, 46, and 30 miles respectively, from Pine Creek. (See enc. I.) The Yale location was considered the best of the three sites because it (1) offered the lowest overall cost alternative, (2) was at the highway junction leading to the Pine Creek area, and (3) had suitable housing within commuting distance.

Since the study assumed that adequate private housing would be available within commuting distance of Yale, the cost of providing Government housing was not considered. The study recommended that the excess residential homes at Pine Creek be sold for offsite removal.

The study considered retaining the headquarters office at Pine Creek because of the low administration cost and because it is the district's principal work area. The Pine Creek site was discounted, however, because it offered little to the employees and was not as accessible to the public as the other sites.

OUR EVALUATION OF PROPOSED MOVE

The 1974 study report showed that the proposed move would increase operating costs about \$18,000 annually. In a March 13, 1975, letter the regional forester said the benefits of increased employee morale and living conditions and being able to offer greater services to the public far outweighed the increased operating costs. The study, however, did not consider all costs involved with the proposed move.

Annual cost factors which need to be considered

The Forest Service's cost analysis, prepared as part of the 1974 study (see enc. II), did not consider the following annual costs to the Government:

- The cost of operating the Pine Creek facility as the principal work area from about April to November, which Forest Service officials have estimated at \$15,000.
- The cost of maintaining the same level of services through overtime or by hiring additional personnel to compensate for work time lost due to increased travel time from the Yale site to the Pine Creek work area and back again. Forest Service officials have not determined how much this will cost.

The 1974 study recommended selling the Pine Creek residences in excess of the district's needs for offsite removal. In April 1975 Forest Service officials said that housing within commuting distance of the proposed Yale site was limited and that it was planning to move the excess

residences from Pine Creek to the Chelatchie engineering site to provide Government-owned employee housing. The Forest Service will continue to incur annual maintenance costs on these residences estimated to be \$2,500.

One-time cost factors which
need to be considered

The 1974 study disclosed the need to move the radio relay station to provide good district radio communications. The cost analysis did not include the estimated \$6,000 cost of this move.

Since current plans are to move the excess residences at Pine Creek to Government-owned land in Chelatchie, the relocation cost should be considered as part of the cost of the proposed move. Forest Service officials have an estimate, from a professional house mover, of \$10,000 to relocate each of the nine excess residences.

Factors other than cost
that need to be considered

According to Forest Service officials, moving the St. Helens Ranger District headquarters would improve services to the public and would increase employee job satisfaction. The proposed Yale site would make the district headquarters more accessible to many forest users either through personal visits or telephone contacts. However, forest users of the Spirit Lake recreation area, which is about 100 miles from Yale, are helped by Forest Service personnel stationed at Spirit Lake. Also, since forest users are not required to check in at the headquarters office, many go directly to the various camp sites and trails without stopping at the district headquarters.

The study report and later discussions and correspondence with district officials indicated that one of the primary reasons for the move was employee convenience. For example, in a March 13, 1975, letter, the regional forester listed the following disadvantages of the present site that Forest Service employees frequently mentioned.

--No social opportunities for children exist except with other Forest Service families. This is especially true for children of high school age.

- No organized recreational activities are available in the vicinity. The nearest theater is 50 miles away.
- To attend church services, where a choice is available, a family must travel 50 miles.
- Employees lack an opportunity to become involved in community affairs.
- Employees lack the opportunity to select friends from other fields of employment.
- Employees cannot easily get away from their job location, their supervisors, or other employees.
- Summer employees lack the opportunity for things to do during off-hours.
- Because of the isolation factor, it is difficult to hire permanent minority employees.

The forest supervisor told us that district employees are not required to live at Pine Creek and that most of the problems mentioned by the regional forester relate to the employees who do live at Pine Creek. According to district officials, the biggest problems are those associated with winter isolation. During the summer months, many of the 60 to 70 summer homes in a nearby development are occupied. On a summer holiday weekend, as many as 500 people are in the Pine Creek area.

According to the regional forester, moving the St. Helens district headquarters to Yale would cut in half the distance from Pine Creek to medical and dental facilities, many forms of recreation, high school, churches, private housing, and adequate shopping facilities. (See enc. III.) This reduction in distance would apply only to employees and families who live at Pine Creek.

District officials told us that, except for the winter months (November through March), access to the Pine Creek site is reasonably good. The road is paved and normal commuting time from Yale is 35 to 40 minutes. However, a number of areas along the road are frequently subject to

landslides and rocks being washed down on the road. District officials said that most of the landslides are small enough that one lane of traffic can be freed and the road can be cleaned up in a day. However, in recent years three major road washouts have closed the road for extended periods of time. The most serious washout occurred in 1974 and closed the road for about 4 months. During this period the county opened a temporary road for the Pine Creek residents.

In a March 13, 1975, letter the regional forester told us that, within the last 2 years, five employees had requested transfers from the St. Helens district due to medical or education problems. The forest supervisor told us that:

"A review of turnover on all districts for the past three years indicates no significant difference between St. Helens and others. I feel this is largely due to our efforts in recruiting individuals who will provide this same stability at St. Helens."

Timber industry views on
proposed relocation

In May 1975 some timber industry representatives told us that they were against the proposed move of the district headquarters from Pine Creek. The main reasons were that (1) the district headquarters would be located farther from the timber sale area and would result in further delays in obtaining necessary services from Forest Service employees and (2) the road to Pine Creek would be more susceptible to serious washouts since it would not be regularly traveled during the winter months and the factors leading to the washouts would go unnoticed.

They were concerned also about the expenditure of funds for moving the district headquarters and the potential expenditure of additional funds to repair the road to Pine Creek due to the lack of winter maintenance. They said that these funds could be put to better use and cited several examples of needed road repairs, campsite improvements, and maintenance projects which had not been completed because of the lack of funds.

CONCLUSIONS

The Forest Service's 1974 cost analysis showed that the proposed move would cost an additional \$18,000 a year. The cost analysis, however, did not include an estimated one-time cost of \$96,000 for moving the radio relay station and the excess residences and additional annual costs of \$15,000 to operate the Pine Creek work area and \$2,500 to maintain the Government-owned housing. As long as there are increased costs, whatever the amount, the move cannot be justified on a purely economic basis. To justify the move, the Forest Service cited benefits to the public and especially to its employees.

The claimed improvement in services to the public primarily relates to better accessibility to the district headquarters for some forest users. However, the extent to which the services to the public will be improved by the move to Yale is questionable since (1) forest users are not required to stop at the district headquarters, (2) forest users are helped by Forest Service employees stationed at Spirit Lake, and (3) some forest users have been dissatisfied with the proposed move. We recognized that the commuting conditions and the isolation of the residents at Pine Creek could affect employee job satisfaction and productivity. Although these factors are not quantifiable, the move could have some beneficial affect on employees. It is not clear, however, whether this impact will be large enough to justify the costs of the move.

RECOMMENDATION TO THE
SECRETARY OF AGRICULTURE

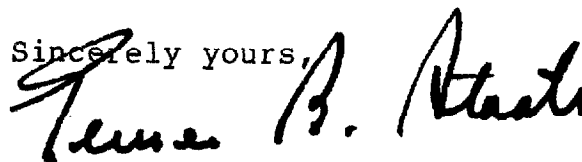
We recommend that the Secretary of Agriculture have the Forest Service reconsider its decision to move the St. Helens Ranger District headquarters, recognizing all pertinent costs.

As agreed with your office, copies of this report are being sent to the House and Senate Committees on Appropriations, the House and Senate Committees on Government Operations, and the Secretary of Agriculture. Also, as agreed,

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C4 copies are being sent to Congressmen Sidney R. Yates and Lloyd Meeds and to former Congressman Wendell Wyatt because of their interest in this report.

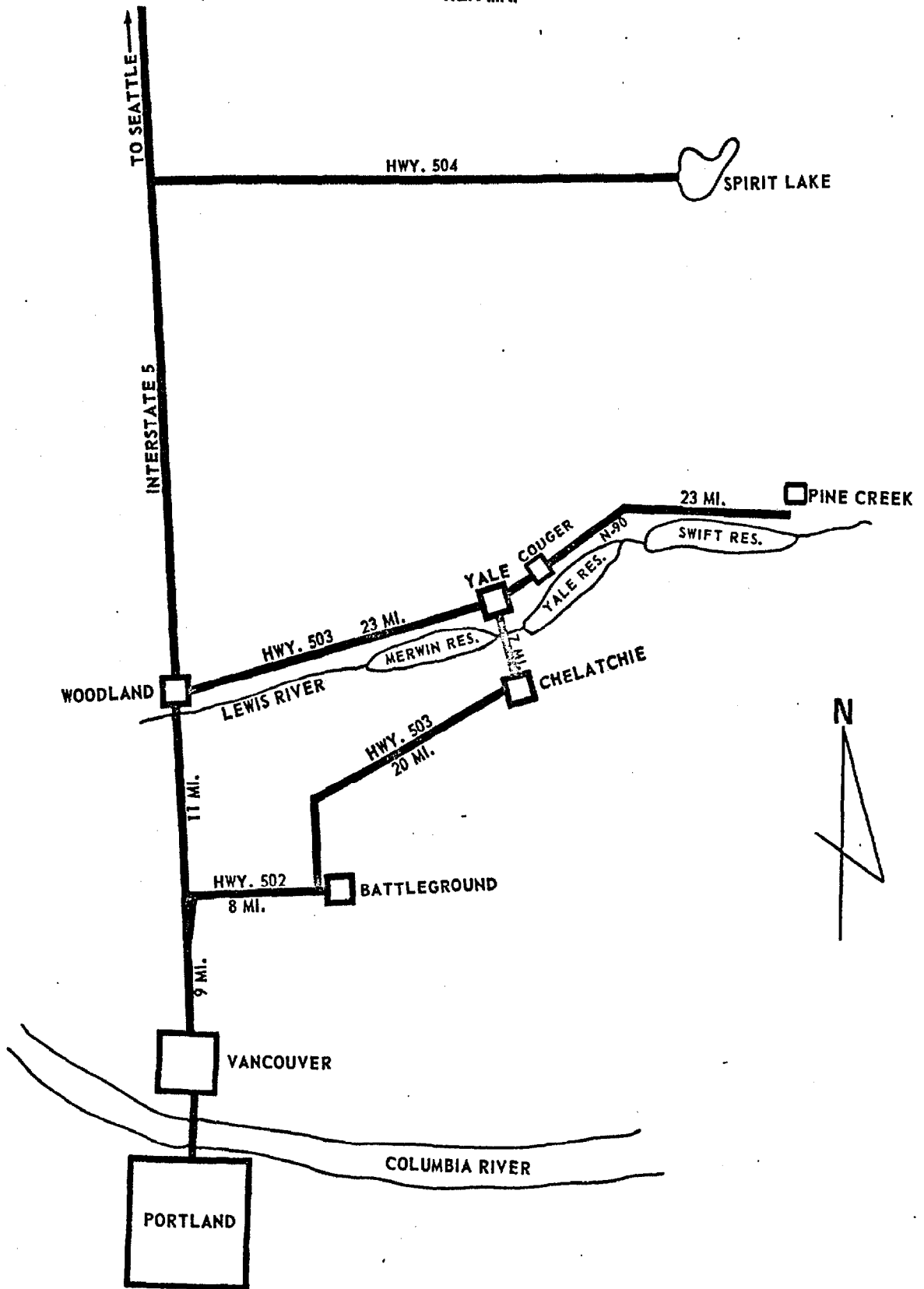
Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "James B. Atchafalaya". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "J".

Comptroller General
of the United States

Enclosures - 3

AREA MAP



COMPARISON OF ANNUAL LEASINGA. COSTS WITH OPERATING COST AT PINE CREEK

	<u>Lease at Yale</u>	<u>Pine Creek</u>	<u>Difference</u>
Lease (see enc. III)	\$32,700		
Snowplowing		\$10,000	
Cost of freight shipments beyond Cougar		865	
Custodial duty to take care of generator on weekend and holidays during winters		2,750	
Electricity	300	12,000	
Telephone	4,225	800	
Maintenance of 9 residences at Pine Creek would be excess		2,500	
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	\$37,225	\$28,915	a/\$8,310

COMPARISON OF TRAVEL COSTS OF ALTERNATIVE SITESB. WITH PINE CREEK (SALARY AND EQUIPMENT USE)

	<u>Yale</u>	<u>Chelatchie</u>	<u>Woodland</u>
Summer	+\$10,502	+\$16,069	+\$19,338
Winter	- 614	- 533	- 877
	<hr/>	<hr/>	<hr/>
	a/+\$ 9,888	+\$15,536	+\$18,461

This summary indicates a relative comparison only since the same assumptions as to equipment and personnel were applied.

a/SUMMARY

\$ 8,310

9,888\$18,198

Source: Forest Service 1974 study.

COMPARISONS BETWEEN PINE CREEK AND YALE

Distances from St. Helens Ranger Station at Pine Creek to:

	<u>Distance</u>	<u>Location</u>
Doctor	50 Miles	Woodland
Dentist	50 "	"
Hospital	70 "	Vancouver
Adequate shopping facilities	50 "	Woodland
Grade School (no school bus available for 15 miles)	23 "	Yale Community
High School (no school bus available for 15 miles)	50 "	Woodland
Church (where choice is available)	50 "	Woodland
Employee private rental houses	50 "	Woodland

At Pine Creek, no commercial power is available. Power is furnished by a diesel generator, which is kept running 24 hrs/day. No commercial telephone line is available. Telephone communication is by Forest Service owned radio-telephone, with one instrument in the office.

Proposal

To terminate a situation requiring employees to work and live in an isolated and remote location, we propose to establish an office with related facilities in the vicinity of the community of Yale.

Distances from Yale to:

	<u>Distance</u>	<u>Location</u>
Doctor	27 Miles	Woodland
Dentist	27 "	"
Hospital	47 "	Vancouver
Adequate shopping facilities	27 "	Woodland
Grade School (school bus avail)	2 "	Yale
High School (school bus avail)	27 "	Woodland
Churches	27 "	"
Private rental housing	27 "	"

Our proposal is to have U.S. General Services Administration ask for bids for construction by a private bidder of adequate headquarter facilities and lease to the U.S. Forest Service as headquarters.

Source: Forest Service 1974 study.