

Washington Calling: 'Rent-a-rangers' in U.S. forests?

By LANCE GAY, Scripps Howard News Service
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"Rent-a-rangers" could soon be patrolling the U.S. forests. Labor unions are furious at plans unveiled by the U.S. Agriculture Department to offer up to two-thirds of the Forest Service's jobs to contractors under the government's program of turning over nonessential jobs to private contractors.

Earmarked for possible contracting are 600 forest-ranger positions, the agency's geology division and biologists who do environmental studies on the impact of timber sales.

- Stop the Alaska lands fights, say congressional moderates.

Rep. Nancy Johnson, R-Conn., is urging the House leadership to drop plans to add a provision to a budget bill that would open Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to oil drilling. Congress rejected the idea last year, and it's only going to provoke unnecessary controversy, she says in a letter to House leaders, co-signed by 24 other Republicans.

But Sen. Ted Stevens, R-Alaska, veteran of the 20-year-old fight to explore for oil along Alaska's coastline, says he's not giving up the battle that he maintains he's almost won.

- A Pentagon panel is weighing revamping the military's traditional 20-year retirement plan, allowing future GIs to retire with only 10 years of service and keeping others who want to continue to work in for as long as 40 years.

The military newspaper Stars and Stripes says the options would be available only for new volunteers. Current military forces would keep with the current plan, which requires the rank and file to work in the military for at least 20 years to qualify for regular retirement, with benefits accumulating for service up to a maximum of 30 years.

Another big change eyed: Future retirees wouldn't be able to draw pension benefits until they reach age 60.

- Plans to expand the Library of Congress' facilities with a new \$54 million warehouse at Fort Meade, Md., are getting an icy reception in Congress.

Sen. Wayne Allard, R-Colo., says plans for the 160,000-square-foot building have been gold plated and adds projected costs have tripled in the last year. Library officials admit the price tag is hefty, but say the library needs warehouse space to replace the temporary space it is now renting.

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- The Air Force says it has come up with a new stay-awake pill that's drug-free. It's made from whey, and airmen are putting the new pill through a study at Brooks City-Base in Texas, hoping to prove that whey does increase stamina and keep people awake.

- Karl Rove, take note: ImpeachPac, an organization of progressive Democrats, is whipping up local city councils to support impeaching President Bush. The group's biggest victory so far came when the San Francisco Board of Supervisors endorsed its effort. Impeachment resolutions have been passed by two other California cities, Santa Cruz and Acata. ImpeachPac now is mounting its effort with city councils in Newfane, Vt., and Chapel Hill, N.C.

All federal employees are to be fitted out with new fraud-proof identification cards by October. The National Institute of Standards and Technology says a pilot project with Pentagon employees shows that the cards encrypted with biometric data work as intended and now is looking for contractors to do the work.

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