BLM seeks smoke-free environment

By Harold White

Early this year Congress passed a law mandating that all government service agencies will provide a smoke-free work environment for their employees. Locally, this affected the Bureau of Land Management, which appointed a task force to establish a plan of implementation for its office.

The task force was formed of smokers and non-smokers and headed by Tom Lahti, a non-smoker.

"We (the BLM) used to have a program where you could smoke at your desk, but this resulted in too many smoking areas and no way to regulate the smokers," Lahti said, "and traveling cigarettes took the problem all over the office."

Health of employees was one issue the committee looked at in its discussion over the BLM smoking policy.

"The evidence used to say that secondary smoke had no effect on non-smokers, but that has changed. Now there is evidence of a direct correlation between secondary smoke and non-smokers," Lahti said.

However, Joe Patti, a 37-year-smoker and BLM employee, has a different outlook.

Patti said: "I don't know what the effects are. I realize there are people with medical problems that smoking aggravates, and I don't want to cause them any misery."

Lahti explained, "The effects of smoke on non-smokers is twofold. First, there is a physiological effect, having to deal with a foreign substance and, secondly, a psychological effect that is hard to measure and is individualistic," he said.

The cost cleaning the air is another issue in this problem.

Lahti said: "The cost of cleaning the air is a major problem is establishing a policy to cover smoking. Filtering machines cost between $1,000-$1,500 each; coupled with the cost of maintenance, this could lead to thousands of dollars a year in additional costs."

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But smoker Patti said: "The ventilation system hasn't been worth a damn since it was built. If the ventilation system worked properly, there would not be such a problem."

In 1986 the U.S. surgeon general issued a report that said more smokers had missed work due to illness or had come to work sick compared to non-smokers.

Lahti said, "This is not only a count of days on sick leave but also a count of days missed due to long-term, catastrophic illnesses."

On the other hand, Patti said: "Unless they have some good evidence, then I don't think you can compare sick individuals. I am not aware of any time I have taken off due to smoking-related illness."

One argument of non-smokers is smoking wastes time.

Lahti said, "From an efficiency standpoint, doing anything at your desk other than work is taking time away from your job."

Yet Patti said he felt, "The idea of lost time at the work place is b.s. You don't light a cigarette and then complete it before you do anything else."

Dirty ashtrays and the residue cigarettes produce are a source of complaint by non-smokers.

Lahti said, "We have equipment that is very sensitive, and the smoke and residue damage its causing us to have it repaired more often."

On the other hand, Patti said, "Until recently we didn't have that much equipment. Most of the smokers here are considerate and don't smoke around the equipment."

Smoking can be a distraction to both smokers and non-smokers, some suggest.

Non-smoker Lahti said, "Smoking in the work place is distracting when people stop to light up as well as take a drag during conversations."

However, Patti said, "Saying that smoking creates a nuisance or wastes time is ridiculous. These observations sound like fairy tales to me."

The problem of fire hazards created by smoking is not of great concern to either side.

Lahti said, "Dumping an ashtray in the garbage may increase the fire hazard but not by much."

Patti said, "If fire hazards were that significant, they would be picked up as increased insurance rates.

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