

Jury awards \$400,000 in Black Hills National Forest gender discrimination case - South Dakota Searchlight

By: Seth Tupper - September 25, 2023 2:01 pm

A jury awarded \$400,000 in damages Saturday to a former Black Hills National Forest district ranger in her discrimination case against the federal government.

The verdict came after a week-long trial in federal court at Rapid City.

The jury found in favor of Ruth Esperance's claim that she suffered gender discrimination. The jury also found that the Forest Service had not proven Esperance would've been reassigned to a different job regardless of her gender.

Esperance was the ranger of the Black Hills National Forest's Mystic District from 2012 until 2018, when she was reassigned to other duties.

She made a statement in a news release through her Washington, D.C.-based attorney, Daniel K. Gebhardt, of the Solomon Law Firm. The statement referenced the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which includes the Forest Service.

"The Department of Agriculture and the Forest Service now bear the responsibility of taking greater steps to address this part of their culture," Esperance said. She added that "those women suffering in silence at the Forest Service can now be heard and those responsible held accountable."

Many previous allegations of gender discrimination have been lodged against the Ag Department and the Forest Service, including at a [2016 U.S. House committee hearing](#) on the topic. Rep. Elijah Cummings, D-Maryland, [said during that hearing](#), "For more than 40 years, the Forest Service has repeatedly faced litigation alleging discrimination against female employees."

Esperance alleged in her lawsuit that she had been subjected to a hostile work environment, excluded from working on special assignments given to male colleagues, excluded from management's communications with male colleagues, subjected to a verbal threat, and had her ideas routinely dismissed in meetings by male managers. She was ultimately reassigned from her district ranger job to another position with decreased authority and duties, and she currently works remotely from Rapid City as a public affairs officer for the Shasta-Trinity National Forest in California.

The U.S. Attorney's Office for South Dakota represents the government in the lawsuit. After South Dakota Searchlight asked whether the government will appeal the verdict, a spokesperson for the office said it does not comment about ongoing litigation.

EDITOR'S NOTE: This story has been updated since its original publication with the U.S. Attorney's Office's statement saying it does not comment about ongoing litigation.

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