GOVERNMENT WORKERS MINDING THE STORE

Before we change federal administrations, I want to sing the praises of a group that I hope will no longer be needed. I refer to Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility. This is no sinecure of desk-hugging bureaucrats seeking to pad their salary and benefits. Instead, its members risk retaliation by reporting agency apathy, wrongdoing and blundering.

The Bush administration spent much of the past eight years trying to strong-arm federal agencies into bending the rules toward its way of thinking. In the environmental arena, PEER protested the muzzling of NASA climate scientist James Hansen. Hundreds of prominent scientists followed suit. PEER also helped derail a plan by the National Park Service to build a large theater/visitor center on the historic battleground of Custer's Last Stand. They even made noise about the closure of Environmental Protection Agency libraries and the destruction of data archives.

Yet in spite of their activism on your behalf, PEER is largely invisible to the public. Why? Because private business and the media have been quite successful in stereotyping government employees as tax-funded Dilberts on the government dole. Such stereotyping has intensified as the ranks of the unemployed and those without benefits rise in the private sector.

As with most stereotyping, a kernel of truth is blown out of proportion and overshadows those who are doing their jobs well. I know this from experience, having been a government employee since 1974, when I began a five-year stint with the U.S. Geological Survey. Since then, I've worked with six other federal agencies while being a full-time employee of Alaska, Wisconsin and Connecticut. I've also served on town committees that brought me into close contact with those towns' employees.

In the most damaging case of government bloat caused by my actions, I once dented a General Services Administration van while disembarking from a Washington state ferry. For the next six months, I watched bureaucrats and secretaries delight in the paperwork trail needed to document the collision between a federally owned van and a state-owned ship.

I've also seen abuse - for example, the highly paid federal employee who read novels at his desk; the pair of state employees who waited five minutes for an elevator to take them down one floor; and the town road crew that parked its truck in a secluded spot to go fishing.

These are the kind of true stories that get public notice, which is why I share them to get your attention. But they involve only a tiny minority of employees taking advantage of incompetent oversight.

In my experience, the vast majority of public employees are necessary cogs in the great wheel of government that keeps our country rolling along. They earn a day's pay for an honest day's work.

At the top end of the government spectrum is another tiny minority for whom the job, rather than the pay or promotion, comes first. Many of those who take environmental stewardship seriously have joined PEER, a voluntary organization with "the distinct honor of serving resource professionals who daily cast profiles in courage in cubicles across the country." They blow the whistle when it needs blowing and insist that their politically appointed bosses do the right thing.

There is no question that all government employees ride on the backs of business. But we must not forget that without them, there would be no place for private business to earn its money: no infrastructure; no military; no police or fire departments; no courts to settle disputes; the list goes on.
and on. The goal is to keep government as small and streamlined as possible while at the same time maintaining the values Americans treasure.

In an ideal world, environmental responsibility would trickle down from the top, and groups such as PEER would have no purpose. But until that day comes, we need them.