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elsewhere, USDA employees consistently have said that they believe managers who are guilty of discrimination are not being disciplined.

Abuse of managerial authority was a common theme, expressed most often by employees within the Forest Service. "Believe it or not," one Forest Service employee said at the Washington, DC, session, "management has used Forest Service law enforcement to police their own employees. Clearly, in these cases, the agency is not acting in the public's best interest, but as a Gestapo, totally out of control....Added to this, there is a segment of management which may not be guilty of these offenses, but chooses to ignore them in the effort not to buck the system." Several employees said that when confronted by complaints, agency leadership at higher levels adopts an attitude of "defending the troops"—the managers—rather than listening to employees or customers.

Although many of the employees who attended the listening sessions were from the Forest Service, USDA's largest agency, similar problems were described by employees of other agencies at the listening sessions, in reports, and in letters. A report produced by Westover Consultants for the Foreign Agricultural Service (FAS) in 1993, for example, said that minority and female employees feel that they are discriminated against and that many of the agency's managers lack the skills and training necessary for managing a diverse workforce. An employee in the Economic Research Service said Asian-Pacific American employees at USDA "get reprisal" when they voice their concerns to top management.

GAO Finds Agency Heads Not Accountable for Affirmative Employment Plans

Managerial commitment to civil rights is fundamentally an issue of accountability. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) regulations make agency heads accountable, and require them to hold all officials, managers, and employees accountable, for the successful implementation of Affirmative Employment Programs (AEP's). AEP's are mandated by Congress for agencies with more than 500 employees. They are designed to eliminate the under-representation of women and minorities in each agency's workforce. However, in 1995, GAO reported that at USDA, and three other Federal agencies, "no formal mechanisms are in place to hold them (agency heads) accountable for the success of their agencies' EEO/affirmative employment programs." GAO also found that senior officials treat AEP's as "paperwork requirements rather than as action plans to be taken seriously."

Contrary to EEOC regulations, most senior managers at USDA do not actively participate in the preparation of AEP's. According to GAO, officials with the authority to make personnel decisions regarding employment, job assignments, training, promotions, and terminations at USDA and the other agencies were rarely involved in the process of identifying barriers and actions to improve the representation of women and minorities in their agencies.