



Case study: Government Employee and the Press

John is a GIS Specialist employed by the US Forest Service on the St. Joe National Forest. Recently, a series of wildfires called the “Crazy Creek Complex” broke out on public and private lands in and adjacent to the National Forest. Fuel and weather conditions have led to a rapid expansion of the blaze and increased potential for property loss. Consequently, a national Incident Management Team has become involved.

A week into the suppression effort, the fire has cost \$7.3 Million and 114 structures have been lost. John has been monitoring and mapping the fire spread for his District Ranger. His tasks include downloading daily fire perimeter updates from the National Interagency Fire Center’s (NIFC) website and performing overlay analysis to determine the ownership of acreages burned. Through NIFC’s FTP site, John has early access to fire data before it gets pushed to public-facing websites like the National Interagency Fire Center (<https://data-nifc.opendata.arcgis.com/>, formerly GeoMAC), typically later each day.

One night on his way home from work, John receives a call from his friend Sarah. Sarah is the director of a non-profit political advocacy group located in the same state as John. Sarah expresses her frustration with the fact that the public-facing website has not made any maps or fire perimeter data available. While not required, providing such data is common practice for large fires. Knowing that John sometimes works fires like the Crazy Creek, Sarah asks John if there’s any way he could provide her with a breakdown of the burned acreages by ownership to use as part of a blog post she has in mind about public lands policy. John is sympathetic to her cause and tells her that he’s going to run those acreages for the District Ranger in the morning, so he doesn’t see why not. He tells her he’ll get back to her tomorrow.

As John nears home, he recalls from his annual federal employee ethics training that the Hatch Act places some restrictions on political activities that executive branch employees, such as John, can undertake. He is unfamiliar with the Forest Service’s policy on data releases such as Sarah’s request. What are his ethical obligations as a certified GISP? What are his obligations under the law? How should John proceed?

References

GIS Certification Institute. Rules of Conduct. Retrieved August 20, 2015 from <https://www.gisci.org/Ethics/RulesofConduct.aspx>.

Urban and Regional Information Systems Association. Code of Ethics. Retrieved November 11, 2022, from <https://www.urisa.org/about-us/gis-code-of-ethics/>

Wikipedia. Hatch Act. Retrieved November 11, 2022, from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hatch_Act

Resources for educators

Suggested discussion points, relevant GISCI Rules of Conduct, and further resources related to this case study are available on request. Send request to David DiBiase (dibiase@psu.edu) along with contact information (including your position and affiliation) and a brief description of how you plan to use the case.

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