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TRANSCRIPTION OF RECORDED INTERVIEW

OF

Mary Wright (telephonically)

October 3, 2012

Sacramento, California

Investigation of Department of Parks &
Recreation - Financial Irregularities

Interviewed by: Thomas M. Patton
Deputy Attorney General
Office of the Attorney
General
State of California

Transcribed by: David Rutt,
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MARY WRIGHT

1 MR. PATTON: So we're going on the
2 record at about 9:07 a.m., I think, on
3 Wednesday, October 3. Thomas M. Patton,
4 Deputy Attorney General, speaking. Michael
5 Mattson, M-A-T-T-S-O-N, a special agent with
6 our -- with the Department of Justice.

7 And we have on the phone Mary
8 Wright, correct?

9 MS. WRIGHT: That's correct.

10 MR. PATTON: W-R-I-G-H-T?

11 MS. WRIGHT: Correct.

12 MR. PATTON: And Mary, I see from
13 looking at organization charts -- it's
14 actually the very first one I have going back
15 to 2000, that back then when Rusty Areias was
16 director you were chief deputy director at
17 Parks --

18 MS. WRIGHT: Correct.

19 MR. PATTON: -- at the Parks
20 Department, right?

21 MS. WRIGHT: Yes.

22 MR. PATTON: And you had -- so tell
23 me a little bit -- you had a long career
24 there?

25 MS. WRIGHT: I did. I spent twenty-

MARY WRIGHT

1 five years with California State Parks.

2 MR. PATTON: And kind of run me
3 through the positions very briefly that you
4 held.

5 MS. WRIGHT: Okay. I joined the
6 department in 1976 as the director of State
7 Parks Training Center out at Asilomar on the
8 Monterey peninsula. After five years there, I
9 became a district superintendant and spent
10 many of the years thereafter in that position.

11 MR. PATTON: What district was that?

12 MS. WRIGHT: The Monterey District.

13 MR. PATTON: Uh-huh. So you came in
14 with some sort of background or experience or
15 education obviously?

16 MS. WRIGHT: I did.

17 MR. PATTON: And what was that?

18 MS. WRIGHT: I began my career in
19 state government with the Department of
20 Health. I have a master's in Public Health
21 Administration --

22 MR. PATTON: Okay.

23 MS. WRIGHT: -- and spent
24 approximately four years in a capacity related
25 to training the management structure of the

MARY WRIGHT

1 County Welfare and Public Health Departments
2 throughout the state in various county --

3 MR. PATTON: Okay.

4 MS. WRIGHT: -- government
5 structures. So when State Parks was looking
6 for somebody to head up their training center,
7 they were really looking for somebody with
8 training background, not state park content
9 background, and so they picked me up in that
10 process.

11 MR. PATTON: Okay. Great. So then
12 you became a district superintendant for
13 Monterey --

14 MS. WRIGHT: Correct.

15 MR. PATTON: -- in about '81.

16 MS. WRIGHT: That's true.

17 MR. PATTON: And then what else did
18 you do at Parks?

19 MS. WRIGHT: In 1992, I was
20 appointed by Governor Pete Wilson as deputy
21 director for the department, and I went to
22 Sacramento in that capacity for a little over
23 a year and --

24 MR. PATTON: Was that chief deputy
25 director or deputy director of a division?

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1 MS. WRIGHT: It was deputy director;
2 it was the number 3 position at that time in
3 the department.

4 MR. PATTON: Okay. Was the deputy
5 director then over the whole agency?

6 MS. WRIGHT: Correct.

7 MR. PATTON: Okay. And you did that
8 for a year, you said?

9 MS. WRIGHT: Yeah, a little over a
10 year. And then I returned to an expanded
11 Monterey District. The department had gone
12 through a restructuring at that time for cost-
13 saving purposes and reduce the number of
14 districts in the field, so I returned to the
15 Monterey District.

16 MR. PATTON: In just a year, like in
17 1993?

18 MS. WRIGHT: I'm sorry?

19 MR. PATTON: That was a year later,
20 in about '93?

21 MS. WRIGHT: Yes.

22 MR. PATTON: Okay.

23 MS. WRIGHT: That's correct.

24 MR. PATTON: Okay.

25 MS. WRIGHT: And then in 1999, I

MARY WRIGHT

1 went back to Sacramento as the chief deputy
2 director appointed by Gray Davis, and that's
3 when Rusty was the director of State Parks.

4 MR. PATTON: Okay. All right. Now,
5 I assume that you've read something in the
6 paper about this financial reporting
7 discrepancy?

8 MS. WRIGHT: I have.

9 MR. PATTON: And have you talked
10 with anybody about it?

11 MS. WRIGHT: I have.

12 MR. PATTON: Who have you talked
13 with?

14 MS. WRIGHT: Some of the same people
15 you've talked with, I understand. Rusty,
16 Denzil Verardo, Dave Van Cleve.

17 MR. PATTON: What was Dave Van
18 Cleve's position?

19 MS. WRIGHT: Dave was a district
20 superintendant.

21 MR. PATTON: For what district?

22 MS. WRIGHT: The Anza Borrego Desert
23 District.

24 MR. PATTON: Anza Borrego?

25 MS. WRIGHT: Yeah. Anza Borrego,

MARY WRIGHT

1 East of San Diego.

2 MR. PATTON: That's A-N-Z-A?

3 MS. WRIGHT: Uh-huh.

4 MR. PATTON: B-R-O-E-G-A?

5 MS. WRIGHT: B-O-R-R-E-G-O.

6 MR. PATTON: Okay. Anza Borrego,
7 and that's where?

8 MS. WRIGHT: East of San Diego --

9 MR. PATTON: Okay.

10 MS. WRIGHT: -- in the desert east
11 of San Diego.

12 MR. PATTON: Okay. How did you --
13 so I don't know, you and he obviously must
14 have worked together somewhere at some point.

15 MS. WRIGHT: Oh, sure. I mean
16 superintendants in State Parks are a pretty
17 tight-knit group, and Dave was a colleague.

18 MR. PATTON: Okay. So you talked
19 with Rusty, you talked with Denzil, talked
20 with Dave Van Cleve. Any other --

21 MS. WRIGHT: Lynn Rhodes.

22 MR. PATTON: And who is she?

23 MS. WRIGHT: Also a retired State
24 Parks superintendant division chief, a variety
25 of positions within State Parks.

MARY WRIGHT

1 MR. PATTON: This is all going back,
2 I assume, to the '90s era?

3 MS. WRIGHT: Well, Lynn -- her
4 career and time with the department was
5 similar to my own. She's only been retired, I
6 think, about four or five years.

7 MR. PATTON: Uh-huh.

8 MS. WRIGHT: So I spoke to her
9 fairly recently. Well, of course, all these
10 conversations were since this story --

11 MR. PATTON: Yeah.

12 MS. WRIGHT: -- became public.

13 MR. PATTON: And she was
14 superintendant where?

15 MS. WRIGHT: A variety of places,
16 but she was my successor in the Monterey
17 District.

18 MR. PATTON: Um-hum. And division
19 chief where?

20 MS. WRIGHT: In Sacramento in
21 headquarters.

22 MR. PATTON: Okay. Anybody you've
23 talked to, Lynn, Dave, Denzil, anybody talk to
24 you about -- has anybody indicated, yeah,
25 they'd heard rumors or they'd heard tell about

MARY WRIGHT

1 some sort of a reserve in the SPRF fund?

2 MS. WRIGHT: No.

3 MR. PATTON: Yeah.

4 MS. WRIGHT: No. And the
5 conversations I had were very brief and
6 general, kind of more in the character of does
7 that make any sense to you, what could
8 probably have been the motivation for people
9 to have deliberately created a reserve and,
10 you know, nobody has any real information
11 other than kind of shaking their heads kind of
12 conversation --

13 MR. PATTON: Yeah.

14 MS. WRIGHT: -- just to give it a
15 sense of characterization.

16 MR. PATTON: So I -- had you
17 yourself ever, while you were at Parks --
18 because you retired when?

19 MS. WRIGHT: 2001.

20 MR. PATTON: So you retired from the
21 chief deputy spot?

22 MS. WRIGHT: Correct.

23 MR. PATTON: And you retired when in
24 '01?

25 MS. WRIGHT: 2001.

MARY WRIGHT

1 MR. PATTON: When in that year?

2 MS. WRIGHT: Oh, the end of June,
3 beginning of the fiscal year, that time frame.

4 MR. PATTON: Okay. Had you -- now,
5 you -- obviously, you knew Becky Brown, I
6 assume.

7 MS. WRIGHT: I did.

8 MR. PATTON: Had anybody ever told
9 you anything about there being some accounting
10 errors, some discrepancies in their financial
11 reports that were getting submitted to
12 Controller and Finance?

13 MS. WRIGHT: No.

14 MR. PATTON: Nobody ever mentioned a
15 word of this?

16 MS. WRIGHT: No.

17 MR. PATTON: Okay. Now, did you --
18 I see that it's actually a little confusing.
19 The organization chart has Chief Deputy Mary
20 Wright right under Rusty Areias, and then to
21 the left it says Chief Deputy Director Admin
22 Services Denzil Verardo, but my understanding
23 is he was in charge of admin services, his
24 area of authority and responsibility did not
25 extend outside of admin services.

MARY WRIGHT

1 MS. WRIGHT: That's correct.

2 MR. PATTON: You were the chief
3 deputy?

4 MS. WRIGHT: That's correct.

5 MR. PATTON: Did -- so he reported
6 to you?

7 MS. WRIGHT: No. He reported to
8 Rusty. The chief deputy position functioned
9 in a variety of ways under different
10 directors, and while I was there under Rusty,
11 we certainly worked closely together, and if
12 somebody didn't have the ability to access
13 Rusty directly, they would certainly come to
14 me, but if Rusty was in the office and people
15 in a variety of executive level positions
16 would report directly to him, and Denzil was
17 one of those.

18 MR. PATTON: Did you get involved in
19 budget presentations and going over it,
20 analyzing it with the director and with Denzil
21 and presenting to the legislature?

22 MS. WRIGHT: You know, I would --
23 I'm not sure exactly what words you used, but
24 I couldn't characterize myself as
25 participating in terms of making the

MARY WRIGHT

1 presentations, but I certainly sat in on
2 executive level presentations that Denzil
3 would make and be a party to the meetings
4 which routinely would have where we would
5 monitor, you know, kind of key benchmarks
6 within the organization such as visitation and
7 revenue and monitor ongoing expenditures, that
8 kind of participation I would have had.

9 MR. PATTON: You know, back in that
10 day -- I guess I'll let you know a couple of
11 things, is that the financial spreadsheets
12 that we've been provided that the Finance
13 Department has worked up show that starting
14 back -- I'm pulling one up into my hands.
15 Starting back in about -- we have numbers that
16 go back as far as '93 before you came back to
17 Sacramento as chief deputy, and there was --
18 even back then, there was about a 4 -- a 2-1/2
19 to a 5 million dollar difference between what
20 was reported in the fund condition statement
21 that goes to Finance as part of the budget.
22 You've heard of that term before, I assume.

23 MS. WRIGHT: Um-hum.

24 MR. PATTON: There was about 2-1/2
25 to 5 million less reported in the fund

1 condition statement than what the year-end
2 financial statement with the Controller
3 reflected. We don't really have a very good
4 answer for why there's a disparity. We
5 realize that there's two different accounting
6 methodologies going on. The Controller is
7 basically a cash basis accounting method, and
8 the Finance deals with something called the
9 accrual method. I don't know if you're
10 familiar with the difference, but there's a
11 difference.

12 MS. WRIGHT: I'm not really
13 familiar, no.

14 MR. PATTON: All right. So anyways,
15 back in the early to mid '90s, there was a
16 disparity, not a huge disparity but -- and
17 then that disparity in about '97 -- going from
18 '97 to '98 really started to grow so that by
19 '98 there was a 9.3 million dollar difference,
20 by '99 -- at the end of fiscal year '99, there
21 was a 13, almost a 14 million dollar
22 difference, by 2000 it was 20 million, and it
23 was 22.7 at the end of '01 -- fiscal year '01,
24 26.8 at the end of '02.

25 So I guess what I'm telling you is

MARY WRIGHT

1 that -- and we also know that it started to
2 get looked at. Becky Brown was obviously the
3 Budget Officer, and she became aware of it and
4 started trying to study it in around 2000 and
5 2001. But obviously this -- and it was an
6 accounting -- I say it was a computational
7 problem occurring in the budget office, but
8 that was never mentioned, I guess.

9 MS. WRIGHT: I have no recollection
10 of it being mentioned. That's all I can say
11 about it.

12 MR. PATTON: All right. Has anybody
13 told you that they recalled this topic coming
14 up while you were still there back in the
15 2000-2001 era?

16 MS. WRIGHT: No.

17 MR. PATTON: Okay.

18 MS. WRIGHT: No. The only thing
19 that Denzil reminded me of was that while I
20 was there and when he was heading up the admin
21 division, we were in a pilot program for
22 performance-based budgeting --

23 MR. PATTON: Um-hum.

24 MS. WRIGHT: -- and that he just
25 speculated about whether -- because we've

MARY WRIGHT

1 read -- those of us that were up there during
2 that time period have read this reporting that
3 this accounting problem goes back twelve
4 years, and Rusty's mentioned it, you know,
5 he's read that as well. And we all of us
6 wondered, well, what was that benchmark
7 related to, why is that being reported in very
8 specific terms as having begun twelve years
9 ago. And that's the only thing that I can
10 recall during that time that I was chief
11 deputy within anything related to budgets was
12 that we were going through this performance-
13 based budget pilot program. We were --

14 MR. PATTON: Do you remember when
15 that --

16 MS. WRIGHT: -- it started as -- I'm
17 sorry?

18 MR. PATTON: Do you remember when
19 that pilot program started?

20 MS. WRIGHT: I believe it started in
21 '99, but I'm not certain.

22 MR. PATTON: Okay.

23 MS. WRIGHT: And that -- my
24 recollection is that we were being given
25 really positive feedback from the Department

1 of Finance on the performance of the
2 department in that respect. And again, in the
3 conversation I had with Denzil fairly
4 recently, he was just simply reminding me that
5 perhaps this twelve-year benchmark that's
6 being referred to is when some of this SPRF
7 accounting began was related to what would
8 have been changes made in our accounting
9 during that pilot program of performance-based
10 budgeting.

11 MR. PATTON: Well, I'll tell you
12 that the twelve-year statement is actually
13 not -- it's not -- there's no magical twelve-
14 year mark. It actually started getting
15 more -- the disparity between the Controller
16 balance reported at fiscal year end and the
17 balance reported in the fund condition
18 statement, the disparity started to grow
19 beginning with the end of fiscal year '97, so
20 it's actually -- that's when the growth
21 pattern started, that started fifteen years
22 ago. And as I just indicated -- so from '97
23 it was 6.3, it went to 9.3 million in '98,
24 13.8 in '99 to 20 at -- as of the end of 2000.

25 So there was something going on, and

1 basically, we -- we're told that where the
2 problem lay was simply in a calculation
3 relating to prior year adjustments. To what
4 extent performance-based budgeting and the
5 calculations related to that could have
6 contributed to errors in the prior year
7 adjustments we don't know. We're not the
8 auditing people, and they will, I think,
9 probably -- you know, they're separately
10 trying to get more to that.

11 But there's not anything
12 particularly magical about twelve years. And
13 also, just so you know, the report of 54
14 million -- as I indicated early on, the OHV
15 disparity doesn't appear to be something that
16 was occurring year after year. It does appear
17 that a disparity was occurring year after year
18 with the SPRF.

19 MS. WRIGHT: Okay.

20 MR. PATTON: So the number is closer
21 to 20 million at this point than 54. I just
22 thought I'd let you know that so --

23 MS. WRIGHT: Yeah. Thank you.

24 MR. PATTON: Yeah. So I guess the
25 last thing is, I don't know if you ever saw

MARY WRIGHT

1 the -- the Finance Department would issue
2 certificates of excellence, sort of awards for
3 good recordkeeping and when numbers -- they
4 actually used to look at the balances reported
5 to Controller and then the Finance. And of
6 course, there has to be some reconciliation
7 with the finance numbers in order to account
8 for different accounting methodologies that go
9 into that report, whether it's -- and whether
10 performance-based budgeting affects that and
11 is something that has to be factored in, I
12 mean, that could be done. But back in the
13 day, sometime before this disparity, the
14 department got a lot of awards. Are you aware
15 of that?

16 MS. WRIGHT: No, I don't remember
17 that.

18 MR. PATTON: Okay. And then Finance
19 actually issued memos. We have memos from '02
20 and '03 after you'd left, but I think there
21 were similar memos before to agencies with
22 special funds, and those memos identified a
23 whole host of special funds, not just in
24 Parks, where there were disparities in finance
25 reports that Finance wanted to see reconciled.

MARY WRIGHT

1 Did you ever -- had you ever heard of any such
2 memos coming from the Finance Department?

3 MS. WRIGHT: I do not have any
4 recollection of that.

5 MR. PATTON: All right. I think
6 that's all we have for you. I just, as I
7 said, wanted to touch base, see if anybody --

8 MS. WRIGHT: Okay.

9 MR. PATTON: -- there was any
10 history with you.

11 MS. WRIGHT: I'm happy to do it.

12 MR. PATTON: Okay. Thanks, Mary.

13 MS. WRIGHT: Good luck.

14 MR. PATTON: Do you have any
15 questions, Michael?

16 MR. MATTSON: I do not.

17 MR. PATTON: Anything more we should
18 have asked you that you think would have been
19 of interest to us, Mary?

20 MS. WRIGHT: No, I can't think of
21 anything.

22 MR. PATTON: All right. Thank you,
23 Mary.

24 MS. WRIGHT: You're welcome.

25 MR. PATTON: Okay. You have a great

MARY WRIGHT

1 day.

2 MS. WRIGHT: Same to you. Bye-bye.

3 MR. PATTON: Bye-bye.

4 And we are off the record at --

5 MR. MATTSON: 9:28.

6 MR. PATTON: -- 9:28 a.m.

7 (End of audio)

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[& - condition]

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