



Forest Service names new chief - Tidwell third consecutive boss from Missoula office

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By *ROB CHANEY of the Missoulian*

Regional Forester Tom Tidwell was named chief of the U.S. Forest Service on Wednesday, making him the third consecutive agency leader to come from the Missoula regional headquarters.

A 32-year veteran of the Forest Service, Tidwell earned local praise for his ability to get people from opposing sides to work together.

“Of all the folks I've worked with in my career, he's one of those rare individuals who has in his bones the understanding of how important it is to collaborate with affected publics,” said Dale Harris, director of the Great Burn Study Group and co-chairman of the Montana Forest Restoration Committee. “It might be the nation's gain, but I think it's our loss. He made a mark in the short time he was here.”

Tidwell replaces Gail Kimbell, who was the Northern Region supervisor in Missoula before taking over the Forest Service in 2007. She in turn replaced Dale Bosworth, who held the top job for six years. Bosworth was regional supervisor from 1997 to 2001.

The Forest Service's Northern Region commands 25 million acres in Montana, Idaho and North Dakota. That includes 12 national forests and four national grasslands.

Before coming to Missoula, Tidwell worked in eight other national forests in three regions. His positions included district ranger, forest supervisor and legislative affairs specialist in Washington, D.C. He was forest supervisor in the Wasatch-Cache National Forest during the 2002 Winter Olympics in Utah. And he has 19 years of firefighting experience, from ground crew to agency administrator.

“You have to have your act together to have success as a regional forester,” said Bosworth, who returned to Missoula after retirement. “This is the last of the wildlands in the lower 48 states. It's an excellent place to get a wide variety of experiences.”

In particular, Bosworth said it's a training ground for bringing together the independent and conflicting interests of the Northern Rockies. This area has led the nation in getting those groups to work together.

“I think the public was growing weary of the fighting, and Tom's been there to support that collaboration and help lead it,” Bosworth said. This administration is interested in people who can collaborate, and that makes Tom a natural.”

One of those opponents has been Mike Garrity of the Alliance for the Wild Rockies.

“He's always been professional and polite to deal with, but in end we've ended up suing him regularly - at least 20 times since he's been regional forester,” Garrity said of Tidwell. “Still, he's had the most open office, and he doesn't take disagreements personally. I've appreciated that.”

Garrity said filling the Forest Service chief job before naming someone as undersecretary of agriculture indicated the Obama administration is not moving far from the Bush administration's policies for forest management. And those policies emphasize timber cutting over wildlife habitat recovery and restoration, Garrity said.

The chief of the Forest Service reports to the agriculture undersecretary. In the Bush administration, Mark Rey held that job. Mississippian Homer Lee Wilkes was nominated for the post, but withdrew June 10.

Montana Wood Products Association board President Chuck Roady also found it curious that an undersecretary wasn't in place before the Forest Service chief was named. But he was pleased Tidwell got the tap.

"He's going to be real familiar with the forests in Region 1," said Roady, who is also general manager of F.W. Stoltz Lumber Co. in Columbia Falls. "We're dealing with forest biomass, trying to reduce the fuel loading and bug infestation, and we need to use that biomass before it's no good. He's well aware of that. His appointment keeps things on a fairly steady course. He reported to Gail (Kimbell), and they worked together really well. He's somebody we'd look forward to working with."

Tidwell was instrumental in supporting the Montana Forest Restoration Working Group, a collaboration of mill owners, conservation groups, outfitters and recreation clubs to break down barriers to progress on forest projects. Bob Ekey, communications director for the Wilderness Society in Bozeman and co-chair of the working group, called Tidwell's financial and personnel support essential.

"Tidwell understands the American public's vision for a national forest has been changing," Ekey said. "People expect supplies of clean water, world-class wildlife habitat and recreation opportunities in their forests."

Fellow working group co-chair Gordy Sanders of Pyramid Mountain Lumber in Seeley Lake added it was reassuring to see the Montana connections preserved in Washington, D.C.

"Maybe it's the talented staff they've got in the regional office and across the region that helps prepare them," Sanders said. "Tom going to Washington brings more of Region 1 to the national forest lands across the country."

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