Family, finances prompted Forest Service nominee's withdrawal

By NOELLE STRAUB, Greenwire

President Obama's nominee to lead the Forest Service and farmland conservation programs says he withdrew his name from consideration for family and financial reasons.

Homer Lee Wilkes, the Mississippi state conservationist and a 28-year veteran of the U.S. Agriculture Department's Natural Resources Conservation Service, was nominated in May as Agriculture undersecretary for natural resources and environment. The post directs the Forest Service and conservation projects at NRCS.

But Wilkes withdrew his name this week, telling E&E in an interview that he made the choice for personal reasons. He has two sons in high school, a junior and a senior, and decided he did not want to uproot the family and move to Washington now. After much prayer and consideration, he said, "We decided as a family ... we decided it might be best I not do that at this particular time."

And he is not yet eligible for certain federal retirement benefits, needing 30 years as a career employee to secure them, Wilkes added.

"If you convert from a career position to a political position, you're taking a chance on whether you're going to be able to finish your retirement," he said.

Wilkes said people have pointed out to him that he knew those factors when he accepted the job, but he tells them he made the mistake of putting himself before his family.

"It's God, family and work," he said. "I think [I was putting] me before family. But the bottom line is, I think this is a good decision. ... For Washington, D.C., for my family and myself, now is just not the best time."
While Wilkes will remain in his current position for now, he said he would be open to the possibility of taking a political position later in the Obama administration. In about two years, his retirement will be secure and his children will have graduated high school.

"There may be a time later on," he said. "We were going to make it work, but after much consideration ... you may have a chance to be undersecretary again, but you only get one chance to raise your family."

Asked how the Obama administration took his decision, Wilkes said, "They weren't overly pleased with it, because a lot of work went into the vetting process." But he noted that the Senate confirmation process had not yet begun when he withdrew.

"I told them as soon as I was comfortable making the decision on it," he said. "They were professional."

Wilkes seems somewhat surprised by the attention his withdrawal has gotten. "I knew it was a big deal, but I didn't know it was that big a deal to say 'no,'" he said.

Wilkes said there were no snags in the background check or vetting process as far as he knows. "They're pretty cautious before they announce you," he said.

Wilkes was the first African-American nominated to the post. Career administration officials said USDA had been trying to promote Wilkes to its headquarters for years but that Wilkes had been hesitant to uproot his family and move to Washington.

He has worked with NRCS in Mississippi, Massachusetts and Texas. As Mississippi's state conservationist, he has taken particular care for forest and wetlands restoration, according to wildlife groups familiar with the state. Wilkes has a master of business administration and a doctoral degree in urban conservation planning and higher education from Jackson State University in Mississippi.

Ramifications

Ray Vaughan, executive director of WildLaw, said the agency has been thrown into some turmoil with the withdrawal. But he said there were a number of high-level officials who were not happy with the choice of Wilkes. They had no problem with Wilkes personally, Vaughan said. But the administration has been getting pressure to solve problems at the department and is facing a power struggle among various senators who want to take it in different directions, he said.
"Having someone who'll just sit there and try to keep everything quiet was not what they wanted," Vaughan said. "Neither side was happy with someone who was going to sit there and do nothing."

After Obama's inauguration, it was widely rumored that the post would go to Chris Wood, the chief operating officer of Trout Unlimited. The administration picked a career NRCS official in order to try to avoid controversy, Vaughan said.

"He was a safe choice, and a safe choice is not a safe choice right now," Vaughan said. Now the administration will have to choose someone controversial like Mark Rey, the previous undersecretary, who was a lightning rod but could handle the pressure, Vaughan said.

"By the nature of the job, you will be controversial," Vaughan said. "They're just going to have to pick someone who is controversial."

The selection of a career NRCS employee for the job was a shift from the previous two administrations. Rey, a former timber lobbyist, held the job in the Bush administration. Jim Lyons, who had worked on forestry issues on Capitol Hill and for the Society of American Foresters, held the post during the Clinton administration.

In overseeing national forests for most of Bush's presidency, Rey had a hand in controversial policies, faced worsening fire seasons, tussled with environmentalists and was even threatened with jail by a federal judge. Environmentalists saw Rey as a fox guarding the henhouse with forestry issues.

But the outgoing USDA undersecretary shrugged off the clashes in an interview just before leaving office. "The person in this job is going to be a lightning rod for criticism irrespective of who that person is," Rey said (, Jan. 20).

Wilkes was unknown to many forestry, environmental and farmland conservation groups in Washington. Conservation advocates were pleased with his nomination, noting that he had worked in Mississippi to forge key partnerships with state agencies and conservation groups on wetlands conservation. They said placing a career conservation-service employee could elevate the visibility of USDA's often overlooked role in conservation programs. Forest groups generally praised his nomination, although some said it concerned them that Wilkes did not have a forestry background (, May 6).

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