



Hope burns for less political, more collaborative Forest Service

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By *MICHAEL JAMISON of the Missoulian*

So, what exactly does a former community organizer from Chicago know about grizzly bears and board feet, or salmon and hydropower? That's the question in the West, where towns surrounded by federal lands eagerly watch President-elect Barack Obama's picks for leadership posts in both the departments of Interior and Agriculture.

The U.S. Forest Service, in particular, has proved susceptible to politics in recent decades, with each administration redefining the agency to some degree. Currently, a former timber industry lobbyist - Mark Rey - oversees the Forest Service as undersecretary of Agriculture. Obama has not announced his short list for that job, but among the names to have surfaced is Missoula's own former mayor, Dan Kemmis.

"It seems as if the public-land pendulum swings with each new administration," Kemmis said. "It's been a kind of 'now-it's-our-turn' game. I believe we need to slow the pendulum, and find the bipartisan middle ground where we can really experiment with consensus and collaboration."

His is a welcome perspective, with analysts from all sides of the public-land debate anticipating less political and more professional agency oversight under Obama.

There is a gap in the map of Forest Service regions. Region 1 covers Montana and northern Idaho. Region 2, down through Wyoming, Colorado and the vast eastern plains. Region 3 in the Southwest, Region 4 the high desert, 5 in California, 6 in the Northwest.

But then the list jumps right over Region 7, leaping straight to 8 in the Southeast, 9 in the Northeast, 10 up in Alaska. Seven, it seems, was lost to consolidation back in the 1960s.

Now, Kemmis imagines a new Region 7, a virtual region not marked by geography and located far off any map.

It's a region, he said, "where people wanting to try a different approach could be given legal authority - call it running room - to attempt something new. We need a place where we can experiment."

The Forest Service has of late found itself laboring beneath a nearly impenetrable lattice of laws, a framework Kemmis argues has resulted in "a very proceduralized decisionmaking process."

It is a process built for - and some would say by - lawyers and judges, "and it absolutely invites people to line up on one side of the fence or the other," Kemmis said.

Bounded by rules and regulations, beset from all sides, the Forest Service, he said, needs a place such as Region 7, "because trying to fix the whole system all at once is a very daunting task and is likely to ignite

all the old wars. If we create a regulatory place to experiment freely, then perhaps we can make smaller, smarter changes over time.”

Things may have been simpler back in the beginning, but they were by no means simple.

From its outset, the Forest Service was torn by the “use it” approach of Gifford Pinchot and the “conserve it” philosophy of John Muir.

Nevertheless, for its first 50 years the agency's mandate was relatively straightforward - conserve the forests, protect the waters and log the timber.

But by the middle of the 20th century, a post-war building boom was quickly stripping forest resources. Then came multiple-use doctrines, as different constituencies fought for their slice of the public-lands pie.

Timber harvest was complicated by recreation, and habitat protection, and wildlife, and watersheds, and wildland firefighting, and forest health, and wilderness and oil and grazing and, finally, adjacent forestland subdivision.

Today, the Forest Service recognizes its roles in conservation, and rural economic development, and forest science, and community outreach, and even in providing jobs for the “unemployed, underemployed, elderly, youth and disadvantaged.”

Smokey Bear has been joined in the woods by hikers and bikers and birdwatchers, loggers and hunters and anglers, environmentalists and entrepreneurs.

“It is,” said former agency chief Dale Bosworth, “a fairly complicated mission.”

And a fairly political one, because each constituency comes with its own market surveys and focus groups, and carries some amount of weight in Washington, D.C.

All presidents in recent history have left their ideological mark on the Forest Service - from Reagan to Bush to Clinton and back to Bush again.

“Some people would say the Forest Service mission is more like mission impossible,” said Bob Ekey, regional director for the Wilderness Society. “It's an agency with an identity crisis. They just get rolling in one direction before a new administration comes along and shifts gears.”

But that political pendulum often has very little meaning on the ground.

Sure, Ekey said, the Bush administration fought Clinton's roadless rule and initiated a “healthy forests” plan much criticized by conservationists, “but there weren't many real gains for industry during the Bush presidency,” Ekey said.

It seems forest management - and the agency itself - moves on a slightly slower time scale than does politics.

“And maybe that's a good thing,” said Tom Partin, president of the American Forest Resource Council, a timber trade association.

“I think the Obama administration, or any administration, is going to be forced to look hard at the health of the forests,” Partin said. “The forests are going to dictate the politics, rather than the other way around.”

Forests beset by climate change and drought and insect infestation are going up in smoke, and no amount of ideology can change that, Ekey agreed.

“The vision of how we use the forests has clearly changed,” he said, “but there's absolutely room in that vision for recreation, wildlife and the timber industry.”

“Obama,” Ekey said, “is a grass-roots organizer who wants to govern from the middle. He likes collaborative efforts.”

“Obama made his way in local organizing,” Partin agreed. “He understands the importance of local wisdom and local control, and I don't think he's going to dictate forest policy from the top down.”

“He likes bipartisanship,” Bosworth said, “and he likes bringing people together. My hope is that that will follow through into agencies such as the Forest Service.”

A collaborative approach, all agree, will be needed to keep working forests working, while at the same time protecting community amenities as well as wildlife and watersheds.

Prior to his election, Obama stressed sustainability as a foundation for forestry, and promised to “listen rather than dictate” when working with state and local leaders.

“The people in the best position to accomplish things are local people,” Bosworth said, “and Obama knows that. Hopefully, that spirit can permeate the administration and create a real culture of collaboratism.”

U.S. Rep. John Salazar, D-Colo., is certainly a collaborator. The lawmaker is renowned for embracing - both figuratively and quite literally - colleagues from the other side of the political aisle. The three-term congressman is a soft-spoken rural Latino who is rarely strident and appears in many ways to prefer his tractor seat to his House seat.

But Salazar has lobbied hard for wildland firefighting money and for ag disaster relief, and even recommended a Forest Service study on using woody debris as an energy source.

The Westerner also pushed for continued use of slurry tankers in firefighting, and now Salazar is believed to top Obama's list to lead the Department of Agriculture.

But he's a farmer not a forester, which is perhaps just as well, because the Department of Agriculture is deeply involved with farm and food issues.

(Other top contenders include Rep. Colin Peterson, D-Minn.; Rep. Sanford Bishop, D-Ga.; Rep. Stephanie Herseth Sandlin, D-S.D.; former congressman-turned-lobbyist Charles Stenholm; and Dennis Wolff, Pennsylvania's secretary of agriculture.)

The real post to watch in the woodsy West, however, is undersecretary of Agriculture, where only a very few names have leaked out to the Beltway rumor mill.

There's Chris Wood of Trout Unlimited. Before landing that job in 2001, he worked for both the Bureau of

Land Management and the Forest Service, eventually serving as senior policy and communications adviser to the chief of the Forest Service.

Then there's Robert Bonnie, of the Environmental Defense Fund. He's vice president of land conservation and wildlife for the group, which marries marketplace solutions and public land problems.

And of course there's Kemmis, senior fellow at the Missoula-based Center for the Rocky Mountain West. His newest book, "This Sovereign Land: A New Vision for Governing the West," was published in 2001 and was top choice for the Interior Department's Executive Forum speaker series.

The recipient of several national awards and fellowships, Kemmis was invited to Washington, D.C., in 2000 to deliver the Pinchot Distinguished Lecture - named in honor of the Forest Service's first top boss.

"I've heard from several people around the region and around the country who are interested in appointments that affect the West," Kemmis said. "And a few people have suggested that I might be a feasible candidate for some of those positions, including that of undersecretary. But so far, I have not heard from Mr. Obama's transition team."

Still, although it remains far too early to predict, Partin remains buoyed by the fact that "our industry can work with any of these choices. There does seem to be an effort here to reach the middle."

In that middle are healthier forests, and fewer red-hot fires, and timber and clean water. In that middle are budgets where firefighting costs are covered as a separate line item, because today those costs devour a full half of Forest Service money, eating into trails and other popular programs. And in that middle are new kinds of timber sales, Partin said, "based not on timber output and revenue, but on what we want to end up with, in terms of forest conditions."

Those are the very sort of sales Kemmis imagines coming out of an experimental Region 7.

"It has seemed to me that there is, potentially, a very productive convergence of forces here," Kemmis said. "For several years now, we have seen a fairly steady movement in the direction of more reliance on collaborative problem-solving approaches to public land issues. Now, we have a president-elect who not only talks about bipartisan problem solving, but in fact has a background of doing just that, albeit in a very different setting.

"On the surface," he said, "it seems as if there's an opportunity for this president and this administration to pay a lot more than lip service to a different way of doing business."

The agency - and its complications - are too big to tackle with one-size-fits-all sweeping change, Kemmis said, and can only be redirected by "building a framework of deliberate experimentation."

It might also be time, he said, for a public land law commission to review all those overlapping statutes that have emerged since the last such analysis, some 50 years ago.

"Partisan victories have proven to be temporary," Kemmis said, "and they almost always end up in court. I think a Forest Service under Obama is going to have to get past partisan politics, and I believe there's reason to be hopeful about that happening."

During the past seven years, federal land agencies have approved more than 35,000 permits for oil and gas

exploration on public lands, and “drill baby drill” became a rallying cry for Obama opponents during the recent campaign.

But many of those permits are not being worked, and Obama has suggested a sort of use-it-or-lose-it approach that would limit new permits until existing ones were developed.

“That's one place you could see some fairly rapid change from the new administration,” Bosworth said. And current White House opposition to the Clinton “roadless rule,” which would protect some 58 million acres, could change rather quickly as well.

Obama also has promised better endangered species oversight, and a shift to “reliable, dedicated funding sources” for wildland firefighting. That last pleases both environmentalists and timber interests, who are anticipating more in the way of local forest restoration projects, which will produce logs as a byproduct.

But for the most part, no one is predicting any radical on-the-ground changes for public lands. It is as Partin said - the forests will dictate the politics, and not the other way around.

In fact, most of Obama's comments regarding the environment and natural resources have been limited to climate change and alternative fuels.

Which is fine, Ekey said, because federal lands have a huge role to play in those arenas. Bosworth, likewise, thinks the new administration could move “much more aggressively” in terms of linking federal forests to national discussions of climate and energy.

All agree Forest Service budgets must be shored up, and no longer bled dry by firefighting costs.

“But these are things that any administration or land manager is going to have to recognize,” Partin said.

Bosworth concurs. “There's only so much tweaking you can do with regard to the fundamentals,” he said. “I'm sure there will be some changes, but I don't know that they'll be as drastic as some people think.”

The future, after all, is in large part written by the past.

“We've been taking from these forests for a long, long time,” Bosworth said. “For railroads and settlers and rural communities.

“Now, no matter which administration is in charge, it's come time to reinvest.”

Facts about the U.S. Forest Service

Nationwide, the U.S. Forest Service oversees some 200 million acres. About 30 percent of Montana's land base is owned by the federal government, two-thirds of which - nearly

17 million acres - is managed by the Forest Service.

In some western Montana counties, federal ownership is more extensive than in other parts of the state. About 43 percent of Missoula County is federal land. In the Flathead, it's

71 percent. Ravalli and Lincoln counties are both about 73 percent federal land. And in Mineral County, the federal government owns a full 82 percent of the land base - which brings home the significance of cabinet-level presidential decisions about who will oversee federal forests at the Department of Agriculture.

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