

# Missoulian

## Northern Region's top forester discusses challenges agency faces

By ROB CHANEY of the Missoulian | Posted: Monday, March 1, 2010 6:15 am

Leslie Weldon can look out her downtown office window to see some of the challenges confronting her as the Northern Region's top forester.

Beetle-killed pine trees, snow-free watersheds and a shuttered pulp mill are just some of the topics Weldon discussed in an interview with the Missoulian. She also spoke of some fundamental shifts in the mission of her agency.

The new overseer of U.S. Forest Service management on 15 national forests and four national grasslands in three states started her career 28 years ago as a fisheries biologist.

Her predecessor, Tom Tidwell, is now chief of the Forest Service. On Wednesday, he told Congress of his agency's new focus on "clean and abundant water."

"If you look back at the founding principles of having a system of public lands, a lot of it had to do with securing supplies of water," Weldon said. "That's an underlying service the national forests can play, and we're putting more emphasis on it. It's a transition in our culture we've been in for two, almost three decades."

Weldon listed the priorities as "ensuring quality habitat, quality water and healthy forests," adding that the traditional "forest" part of forest management would continue. But the old-style corporate logging is morphing into new "stewardship contracts" that mix timber-cutting with landscape restoration.

The looming fire season may also display some of this new style of forest management. Weldon said the pine-bark beetle epidemic that's reddened millions of forest acres will change both firefighting tactics and forest harvest priorities.

"We'll prepare for a fire season that's longer than we usually experience," she said. "We need to game out likely scenarios with landscapes going from red to gray, and becoming higher risks for wildfire."

That means more emphasis on fireproofing forests close to urban or residential areas, and possibly using fires to break up some of the swaths of beetle-killed pines into more varied stands.

Weldon joined the Stevensville Ranger District office in 1989, and became its district ranger in 1992. In 2000, she was named forest supervisor of the Deschutes National Forest, headquartered in Bend, Ore. She spent the past two years in Washington, D.C., as the Forest Service's external affairs officer, dealing with agency communications, legislative affairs and partnerships with private organizations.

Below are some of the highlights of the Missoulian's wide-ranging interview with the Weldon on issues confronting the Forest Service.

**Missoulian:** At recent public meetings in Superior and elsewhere, the Forest Service has been criticized as an agency out of touch and unresponsive to local concerns. How do you address that?

**Weldon:** It's really difficult to hear that kind of feedback. It's not the impression we want to be leaving with the public. There's an expectation all our folks have that we can be as responsive as possible. At times we can't give the answer or the rapid response our citizens are looking for. Talking with lots of rangers around the region, they have their frustrations about what it takes for us to get our work done these days. They do have that goal about being as responsive as possible. That's something that's a real high value.

**Missoulian:** Over the past decade, the Forest Service has been centralizing its human resources and information technology staff. We're hearing those changes have not been working out as planned, and that in some cases, local offices have unofficially duplicated the services because they can't get matters handled from the central control. Is that centralization effort getting reversed?

**Weldon:** With information technology, we've gone to system of customer service that's centralized. There've been a lot of successes, but there are still some challenges in an agency that has some 30,000 people, many of whom have high reliance on their computers and databases and programs they use to do their jobs. The system works pretty well, but there are always those times where we have real problems with response times and follow-up and things like that. That does frustrate our employees who are trying to do their best. It's a huge transition we've been in for a number of years, And we have a long way to go.

(On human resources), our goal was to have all of that in one place. But we've found that some aspects of those are better delivered by having someone more closely available, than by doing all that by phone. People in my position as forest supervisors really needed to have help when trying to make organization changes. To make them more efficient, there's lots of advice that's really directly needed, and we had just distanced ourselves a little too far from that. So on a national level, our chief said we need to do something different. We're putting a lot of changes in place that will come down in the next year or so. We're moving aspects of human resource management closer to the humans, closer to the people so they can be more effective.

**Missoulian:** Does that duplicate the services you centralized in Albuquerque?

**Weldon:** It isn't a duplication, it's a change in how we're designing what success means. We will be keeping service in Albuquerque, and we'll also move those resources back closer to the employees themselves. We want to be responsive to what the employees felt wasn't there. There are a lot of new responsibilities that supervisors will be taking on, that they will have to become good at. They will be the ones who are responsible for that.

**Missoulian:** Beetle-killed trees have become a major challenge to forest management, and Forest Service Chief Tom Tidwell has called for focused attention on the problem. What's going to happen here?

**Weldon:** We're working with our entomologists and annual surveys to see the rates of spread, and get a sense of where this is going to stop. Then we'll be priority-setting around what actions we can take. We have concerns around access, with trees falling across open forest roads, campgrounds, and ski areas we need to focus on. We need to be prepared for the fire risk that's going to come in predominantly dead forests across large acreages. Hopefully we can get our biomass markets to work again, and get that smaller material out. Then we prepare for the next landscapes - what do we do differently? We'll look at different mixtures of tree species we'd plant back and pay closer attention to how we're putting in future treatments, so we don't make it easier for wildfire or disease to spread across the landscape.

**Missoulian:** How will the closure of Smurfit-Stone Container's pulp mill affect those plans?

**Weldon:** All of us in the forest management and conservation community have big concerns now that we do not have the Smurfit-Stone Container mill as that place where many of the individuals purchasing our timber sales were intending to have their material go. We have a high reliance on our ability to get those materials out of the woods. We're going to see changes and adjustments to timber sale and stewardship contracts we have. We may be chipping and dispersing those materials back into the woods. More likely, we look at having areas with large stockpiles of material and smaller piles we just end up having to burn to eliminate that hazard from the forest. There are huge opportunities for those materials, and we just want to work as hard as we can to get the markets in place again.