

## Regional forester downplays first female chief status

By *SHERRY DEVLIN - The Missoulian - 03/16/04*

Any day now, Gail Kimbell's photograph will be framed and ready to take its place on the wall in the regional forester's office in Missoula.

She'll find herself in distinguished, but decidedly masculine, company.

Portraits of the U.S. Forest Service's previous 18 regional foresters — from William Greeley to Brad Powell — already adorn the wall, nine on either side of the spot reserved for the new boss.

Still, Kimbell doesn't put much stock in her status as the Northern Region's first female regional forester.

"I'm sure those 18 men who came before me were as different from one another as I am from them," Kimbell said Monday. "I have 30 years of experience in natural resource management, and I hope that has far more bearing on what I bring to the job than does my gender."

When she arrived in Missoula this month, Kimbell carried with her credentials as a forest supervisor (three times), a district ranger (twice) and a forester. Twenty-eight of her last 30 years were spent on the ground, working in and around the woods.

The last two were spent in the Forest Service's Washington, D.C., office as associate deputy chief for the national forest system.

Kimbell arrived, too, with a single priority: to restore healthy ecosystems and healthy communities in and around the 12 national forests in Montana and northern Idaho.

"My priorities start and stop with what I can do to facilitate the restoration of healthy forests," she said. "That's the priority."

So this year, the Northern Region forests will complete fuel-reduction — also known as healthy forests — projects on 75,500 acres, almost double last year's accomplishment.

About one-third of the work will involve thinning forests crowded or rendered sickly after nearly a century of aggressive wildland firefighting.

The other two-thirds will involve the return of fire in a controlled — prescribed — fashion.

Everything else the region's forests undertake will be intended to fulfill healthy forests goals as well, Kimbell said — every timber sale, every salvage sale, every watershed or wildlife project.

If the Forest Service is to address the growing wildfire danger, there "has to be active management on the ground," she said. "We have to manage for the health of the whole landscape — for clean water, for wildlife habitat, for healthy vegetation, for recreation."

The work is nothing new, just newly named, Kimbell said. "I've been working on healthy forest issues since my first day. We were doing salvage work following an infestation of tussock moths."

Kimbell began her career with the Bureau of Land Management in Medford, Ore., putting her newly minted forestry degree (from the University of Vermont) to use.

At 24, she fulfilled a childhood dream and moved to Alaska to work in the Chugach National Forest.

“One of the magical things about a Forest Service career is all the beautiful places you get to live,” she said. For Kimbell and her husband, that list includes the Mount Jefferson Wilderness in Oregon; Kettle Falls in northeastern Washington; the Eagle Cap Wilderness outside LaGrande, Ore.; and the Bighorn, Pike and San Isabel national forests in Wyoming and Colorado.

Kimbell was forest supervisor on the Bighorn National Forest after the tumultuous departure of supervisor Larry Keown in 1997.

Keown was reassigned to the agency's Denver office after employees questioned his management of both people and the national forest. During Kimbell's tenure, those same employees believed they were retaliated against by being reassigned or terminated.

On Monday, Kimbell said the Bighorn forest “had been embroiled in issues for years” before her arrival and denied that she was involved in any retribution against the whistle-blowers.

Some employees were angry about a decision on the management of the Medicine Wheel, an American Indian sacred area on the Bighorn forest, she said. Others were victims of downsizing required because the forest was “overstaffed for its budget.”

She came to Wyoming not to clean house, as some workers charged, but because she was weary with southeast Alaska's rainy weather.

“I wanted 300 days of sunshine after all that rain,” Kimbell said.

When she moved to the Pike and San Isabel national forests as supervisor, Kimbell became directly involved in the wildfire-forest fuels issue.

In 1996, before she arrived, the Buffalo Creek fire burned 10,000 acres in four hours, then was followed by a downpour that washed tons of sediment into reservoirs used for drinking water by the city of Denver.

In 2000, the High Meadows fire burned another 10,000 acres, half on public land, half on private. Fifty-two homes were burned as well.

In both instances, foresters and firefighters found that when the fire hit areas where fuels had been thinned, the fire dropped to the ground and could be more easily fought, Kimbell said.

The National Fire Plan followed the 2000 fire season and was significant, Kimbell said, because “we had both an administration and Congress talking about their commitment to forest health.”

Now comes the work, which Kimbell knows will be contentious.

“There will always be disagreements and discussion,” she said, “but that's good. I am under no illusion that we will ever change everyone's mind. I hear from a lot of people from all sides every day.”

In the Northern Region, Kimbell said she is "blessed by an excellent staff" committed to healthy forests and communities and more than qualified to do the work.

There have been concerns and questions since former regional forester Brad Powell was reassigned late last year because he used government-issued computers to access pornography, Kimbell said.

"But people are ready to move on," she said. "I worked with Brad for years and have the utmost respect for his skills and abilities as a resource manager."

Over the next six months, Kimbell will travel to each of the national forests in her new domain and to most of the ranger districts, meeting her staff and the communities they serve.

"That's where my heart is," she said, "and where it will remain."

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