

New forest boss expects disputes to continue

By [SCOTT McMILLION](#) Chronicle Staff Writer

Debates and arguments over national forests will only continue to grow as public demand increases for the water, wood and recreation the forests provide, said Gail Kimbell, the newly appointed boss of all national forests and grasslands in Montana, northern Idaho and part of North Dakota.

"The contention over those areas is just going to grow and grow and grow," said Kimbell, regional forester for the U.S. Forest Service's northern region, based in Missoula.

On the job for only two months, the 30-year veteran of the agency is touring the region's 25 million acres of forests. She met with the Chronicle's editorial board this past week.

Population growth has pushed more and more people into the region. Many of them live in the "wildland-urban interface," where their presence raises the level of concern about wildfires. Others live in town, but recreate in national forests, increasing the number of boot, ski and tire tracks there.

Kimbell said she sees growing consensus on some issues, like the "Fire Wise" program meant to help people protect their property from forest fires.

But at the same time, she also expects continued disputes over timber sales and fuel-reduction projects.

"A least 99 percent of our projects that involve a chainsaw are appealed," she said.

She predicted that forests will continue to provide lumber, but loggers shouldn't expect to see a return of the days when billions of feet of timber fell every year.

"I see the demands on national forests for all sorts of resources," she said. "I don't see us returning to the timber-harvest levels of the 1980s."

Still, she said she comes with a "mandate to work very hard" to implement the Healthy Forests Initiative outlined by President Bush and passed last year by Congress. As part of that, she wants to expedite the harvest of trees killed by wildfires.

Environmentalists around the country criticize that legislation as a giveaway to the timber industry, but Kimbell defended it.

"As the president spelled it out, it's about healthy forests and healthy communities," she said. "Other people have tried to make it into something else."

She also predicted the northern region national forests will see more "stewardship contracting," a new program in which the Forest Service works with private companies or local government. In essence, the program lets the Forest Service decide what type of work needs to be done, then pay for that work, partially or wholly, with materials, usually wood.

For example, Gallatin National Forest supervisor Becki Heath said officials are working on a stewardship contract south of Big Timber that could offer somebody commercial trees in exchange for building picnic tables, improving trails, thinning small trees or piling brush to reduce fire threats.

While such projects have evoked skepticism among the green communities in some areas, Kimbell said they have also attracted enthusiasm.

"There are great opportunities for local employment," she said.