

FOREST SERVICE

New chief a 'stubborn gentleman' who listens to his rivals

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Tony Tooke will serve as the new chief of the Forest Service. Forest Service

When Tony Tooke became regional forester for 13 Southern states in 2015, he made a promise that's shaped his reputation at the Forest Service: He wanted to meet soon with every state forester in the region.

"It amazed me, considering how busy his schedule was," Virginia State Forester Bettina Ring recalled this week.

Tooke kept his word, emerging as a good listener who's well-prepared for his new role as chief of the Forest Service beginning Sept. 1, said Ring and other people who've worked with him.

"He gets the key players feeling like it's their vision," said Tom Martin, president and CEO of the American Forest Foundation, a conservation group representing family forest owners.

People familiar with Tooke, currently the agency's regional forester for the Southern Region, say he's been eager to hear from the wide range of groups with competing interests in environmental protection, recreation and commercial timber production. That's good, Martin said, because when Tooke starts the job, one of his biggest challenges will be to face a similar "suite of expectations" on a national scale.

Tooke didn't reply to an emailed request for an interview, and a Forest Service spokeswoman, Babete Anderson, said the agency wouldn't make him available for interviews until he's in the new position.

Tooke's willingness to travel the Southern Region and sit down with state foresters made a positive impression. In contrast to Western states' wide expanses of federal land, most forested land in the South is owned privately or by states, and Tooke's promise to meet face to face with local representatives seemed ambitious, Ring said. State and private forestry receives a sliver of the agency's budget but spreads the Forest Service's reach beyond national forests that dominate in the West.

Tooke didn't stop there. When wildfires struck the region in the past year, Ring said, Tooke pulled state and local forestry officials together for discussions about the lessons they learned and how agencies might confront fires in the future.

Tooke does have critics; the Sierra Club and other environmental groups opposed a Forest Service draft environmental impact statement on a proposed gas pipeline going through the George Washington and Jefferson National Forests he oversees, saying it ignores severe and long-lasting impacts.

And last year, Tooke apologized in writing to American Indian tribes for the Forest Service's erosion control work in 2014 — before he was on the job — that damaged sections of the Trail of Tears on the edge of the Cherokee National Forest in Tennessee. But the agency was slow to make repairs and didn't hold employees sufficiently accountable, said Jeff Ruch, executive director of Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility, which called for an investigation by the Department of Agriculture.

A native of Alabama, Tooke, 55, received an undergraduate degree in forestry from Mississippi State University and went to work for the Forest Service as a teenager. He owns about 200 acres of forest and has a knack for storytelling as well as listening, Ring said. Because of his personal experience in private forest management, Tooke identifies with the South's greatest forestry priorities, including maintaining mixed uses for forests, limiting encroachment by commercial development and restoring the once-widespread longleaf pine, she said.

He's also "the essence of a stubborn gentleman," who's honest, polite and forthright — and sticks to his convictions, said Jim Furnish, a retired deputy Forest Service chief who's worked with Tooke as a contractor on forest management issues.

Like outgoing Forest Service Chief Tom Tidwell, forest groups said, Tooke has experience as a regional forester that gives him an appreciation for state and private forestry. That policy area sometimes operates in the shadows, compared with headline-grabbing challenges such as the climbing cost of wildfires, which now take up more than half the agency's annual budget of slightly more than \$5 billion.

Furnish said he gained a sense of Tooke's willingness to hear competing ideas when the regional forester helped arrange for Furnish to speak about his memoir, "Toward a Natural Forest," at an event in 2015, despite other Forest Service officials' negative reaction to the book, which takes a sometimes-critical look at the agency's relationship with the timber industry.

Tooke has developed a working relationship with some of the agency's critics, including the Southern Environmental Law Center, said Sam Evans, the organization's staff attorney and leader of the national forests and national parks program. Tooke met with locals over dinners and in other settings "without at all micromanaging his local Forest Service staff," Evans said.

"My overall impression of him is one of great respect," Evans said. "We'll be sorry to lose him in the region."

How big an impact Tooke can make on national forest policy remains to be seen. As a Southerner, he and Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue — who oversees the Forest Service as part of the Department of Agriculture — share a connection that could give Tooke a boost if he wants to pursue changes, Furnish said. Tooke will have about a six-month honeymoon period in which to set the tone, Furnish said.

He'll also have to manage the agency's relationship with Congress, where some members lean toward environmental protection while leaders on key panels push for more active forest management and timber production, a debate that has slowed progress on changing how the Forest Service pays for wildfire suppression.

Disagreements over timber harvests helped sink Tidwell's efforts on wildfire budgeting, said former Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack, who also personally lobbied lawmakers on the issue.

"We almost got it done," Vilsack said, before Senate Energy and Natural Resources Chairwoman Lisa Murkowski (R-Alaska) and ranking member Maria Cantwell (D-Wash.) made clear that they'd insist on a more pro-timber approach at the Forest Service. "We just could never get those two in the right place."

In addition, Tidwell largely missed an opportunity during President Obama's administration to push a conservation-minded agenda at the Forest Service, leaving the agency "a bit rudderless," Furnish said.

Furnish said the agency should look for ways to rein in spending on wildfires, which might include environmentally focused ideas that make higher-ups in the Trump administration uncomfortable. "They need to pick up a win, and really get moving."

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