

Lake Tahoe Forest Service chief retiring



Nancy Gibson is retiring from the U.S. Forest Service in January. Photo/Provided

By Kathryn Reed

Relationships and collaboration are what have allowed Nancy Gibson to accomplish things her predecessors have not always been able to do.

While she has not done everything she has wanted, the forest supervisor of the Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit knows the job could never completely be done. Such are the hazards of managing one of the more complex forests in the United States.

Gibson took over the top job with the local Forest Service office in March 2011. She will retire Jan. 3, 2015, after 37 years with the agency. This is Gibson's second stint in Tahoe. She was on temporary assignment to LTBMU as deputy supervisor from November 2006 to March 2007.

But she's not going anywhere. She and her husband built a house in Meyers that they moved into last year. She plans to take the advice of friends to learn to say "no" and not do too

much the first year other than have fun. Her husband has been retired for six years, so she knew it was time for her to do the same.

During her tenure with the agency she has seen many changes.

“This evolution of forestry, national resource management and science coming together to better synthesize all disciplines has been pretty remarkable,” Gibson told *Lake Tahoe News*. “It’s getting back to our roots, but also reinventing ourselves as a conservation agency.”

Fifty years ago no one talked about climate change. Now it’s an integral part of nearly every decision regarding the forest.

Lake Tahoe is unique in many ways. It is the only forest with urban lots. (There are 3,500 scattered throughout the 155,000 acres. Seventy-eight percent of the land in the basin is managed by the USFS.)

What she’d like to do is teach tourists that dumping ashes from their vacation rental into the empty Forest Service lot next door is how wildland fires are started. It’s a problem her counterparts in other jurisdictions don’t have to deal with.

Fire is a huge part of this office – which is unusual for a forest supervisor’s headquarters. Initial attacks are more the work of ranger stations. Not so here.

Gibson says the work of the basin fire chiefs group is beneficial to the area in terms of fuels reduction and firefighting efforts.

Having the hotshot crew become certified this year points to the significant role firefighters have in Tahoe.

Normally the more acreage a forest has, the more complex it is. Not so with Tahoe. Size-wise, this is a small forest.

Issues-wise it is huge. Most forests are in one state, and if it does go into another, it usually isn't of much consequence.



TRPA chief Joanne Marchetta and LTBMU head Nancy Gibson at the 2014 Lake Tahoe Environmental Summit. Photo/Kathryn Reed

Also unique to Tahoe is the role of the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency – another federal agency. That relationship has become more amicable through the years.

When Gibson arrived the hostility between the USFS and Lahontan Regional Water Quality Control Board was palpable. That animosity evaporated with the leadership change at both organizations; which in turn filtered down to the rank and file employees.

“If we don't have relationships, we don't have the desired outcomes,” Gibson said.

Being able to work with her peers from other agencies has helped the USFS accomplish its goals. This is a new era in the basin where people are working together and being less territorial.

“All the players rely on each other to keep this environment sound,” Gibson said.

In a one-on-one with *LTN*, Gibson repeatedly spoke of the need

to balance environmental, ecological and social concerns when it comes to making land management decisions.

When she arrived in Tahoe the discussions all focused on water. She helped change that so conversations center on forests. She said a holistic approach needs to be used when managing lands. Gibson pointed to how managing the uplands will ensure water clarity downstream.

Gibson's employees are dealing with a forest that has more visitors per acre than any other forest in the United States.

When she got here there was no cohesive approach to dealing with Fourth of July, even though many visitors are spending time on a Forest Service beach. And it's the busiest day of the year in the basin. It wasn't until 2013 that the incident command system was put into place.

"Before we didn't know where our employees were at all times," Gibson said.

She has spent every July 4 in the field to witness what her employees are contending with.



Nancy Gibson plants trees
at Lake Tahoe.
Photo/Provided

She is proud to be at the helm as work on the Forest Service's reach of the Upper Truckee River started after having been in the planning stages for years. Implementation of the 10,000-acre South Shore Fuels Reduction project is another accomplishment.

While she had hoped the Zephyr fire lookout would have been moved to White Hill on Spooner Summit during her watch, that is doubtful because of an ownership dispute. Gibson said the Forest Service has documentation that the feds are the rightful owner. She is hoping for an amicable resolution so the lookout will be accessible to the public.

She also would have liked for the Forest Plan to be in place. That isn't likely to happen until 2015 after she has moved on.

Gibson's eyes light up when she speaks of continuing the work started with Generation Green, the youth program, and other times in her career when she has helped young people succeed and communities move forward. She can see doing something along those lines in retirement.

A replacement for Gibson has not been named. She's hoping the next supervisor will be on board before she turns in her Forest Service greens for civilian clothing so she can introduce that person to the players in the basin, explain some of the nuances of the job and ease the transition into this unique forest.

Then it will be time for her to spend time with her two children, other family in Arizona and Montana, friends, as well as appreciate the Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit from an entirely different perspective. While the demands of work only allow her to get out in the woods about one weekend a month, she plans see more of it after the first of the year.