

Tribal liaison is a bridge to the USFS



Grace Newell has been a bridge between the U.S. Forest Service and local Indian tribes. Photo/Jeremy Spoon

By Erica Hupp

When asked to describe her job, Grace Newell said with pride, “I serve as a bridge between the tribes and the U.S. Forest Service. And it’s a two-way bridge; that’s very important.”

Newell is the tribal liaison for the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest, stationed at the supervisor’s office in Sparks. She goes on to explain that she communicates the agency’s mission to the Nevada tribes and relates their perspective to the Forest’s leaders.

As a Paiute Shoshone tribal member, Newell grew up on Lone Pine Reservation in the Eastern Sierra. She now lives in

Truckee. Though certainly not required for the job, she said that her heritage has helped her establish positive working relationships.

“It’s a welcome change for the tribes. They feel comfortable having a fellow Native American as their liaison,” said Newell. “However, it can also be awkward at times. I work for the agency, not vice versa.”

Her career began with an academic scholarship to Dartmouth College, where she studied history. After graduation in 1978, she continued working for the university as the director of its Native American Program. She recruited academic Native American students from across the Western United States.

After her father passed away in 1983, Newell returned home to Lone Pine to be with her family. She took a summer job with the Sequoia National Forest as a wildland firefighter on the Horseshoe Meadow Hotshots, the first fire crew composed primarily of tribal members. She was one of only two women in the group.

“At that time, there were very few women in wildland firefighting,” Newell said. “So I was breaking through barriers.”

That summer job turned into a lifelong career. “I fell in love with the Forest Service and never left,” she said.

For many years she served in a variety of wildland fire positions in California and Nevada, including helitack crew, fire engine operator, rappel crew, hand crew captain, fuels specialist, and fire management officer.

“Early in my career I was advised to get a wide range of experience in order to move up in the agency,” said Newell.

Nearing the mandatory firefighter retirement age of 57, Grace decided to take on a new role so that she could keep working.

"Fifty-seven just seemed too young to retire," she said. So in 2012 she started to work in Sparks as the tribal liaison for the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest.

Newell said her most memorable experience from her current role has been representing tribal perspectives during the development of bi-state sage-grouse management policies.

"The tribal voice really needed to be heard," she said. The policies were designed to manage sage-grouse habitat, where pinyon trees had encroached upon sagebrush ecosystems, rendering them uninhabitable for the birds. However, the tribes viewed the issue differently.

"To them, the pinyon represents the tree of life," said Newell. "It's a food source as well as a cultural center for family gatherings. To the tribes, the tree goes where it needs to. There's no such thing as encroachment."

Newell's efforts helped managers reach a compromise to restore the sage-grouse's habitat while still respecting tribal views and needs.

Now 61, Grace said she is finally ready to retire and looks back on her career with satisfaction. "I feel proud of the work I've done," she said. "I think I've played a role in helping the Forest Service, the land, and the tribes."

Erica Hupp works for the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest.