

Gov's complaints reach chief's ear

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WASHINGTON -- The newly appointed U.S. Forest Service chief said Thursday he would look into Wyoming Gov. Dave Freudenthal's complaint that the agency has excluded the state from federal economic stimulus funding.

In a telephone interview with The Associated Press, Tidwell said he was not familiar with the specifics about Wyoming's concerns, which were expressed in a scathing letter from the governor this week to Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack. But Tidwell said he would look into the situation, even as he moves quickly to ensure that the Forest Service spends its \$1.15 billion share of federal economic stimulus funding.

The Forest Service has spent \$643 million of its stimulus money so far, including \$228 million in projects announced this month to repair forest roads and bridges in 31 states. Tidwell said even more projects should be approved in coming weeks.

"We're focused on doing the ones that have been selected and letting the contracts so people can get back to work," Tidwell said. "That's our first priority."

In his letter, Freudenthal said Wyoming hadn't received anything in Forest Service stimulus spending, while neighboring states have received a combined \$170 million.

Specifically, Wyoming's forests are suffering from the same pine beetle epidemic that has swept across the West, the governor said, noting that other states like Colorado have received millions in federal money to address the impacts of beetle-killed timber.

"Forgive my pessimism, but I have my doubts that most in Washington can even find Wyoming on a map, no less understand the tremendous resource issues we face," Freudenthal wrote.

Tidwell, 54, was named the agency's 17th chief on Wednesday, capping a 32-year Forest Service career. He most recently supervised national forests in northern Idaho, Montana and the Dakotas.

Tidwell said he will continue many of the policies of his predecessor, Gail Kimbell, including a focus on fighting climate change and reaching out to children to make them more aware of and comfortable with national forests.

He said he would use his experience developing a policy on roadless forests in Idaho as a model for his new job. Tidwell, the top forester in a four-state region, worked with Idaho officials, environmental groups, the timber industry, recreation enthusiasts, Indian tribes and others as the state developed a policy for control of remote, roadless forests.

Idaho was the only state exempted from a recent order by Vilsack drastically slowing down approval of new road projects in national forests.

"I have found these collaborative efforts that bring together a diverse group of interests is probably one of the best ways for us to resolve the controversial issues," Tidwell said. "Bring folks together and let them understand each other's values and develop relationships."