

Nominee from Oregon pledges to boost workforce

By ANTONIO SIERRA
East Oregonian

WASHINGTON, D.C. — Chuck Sams on Tuesday, Oct. 19, stepped out publicly for the first time not as an administrator for the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, a nonprofit executive or a veteran, but as the potential director of the National Park Service.

With his wife and eldest daughter seated behind him, Sams introduced himself to the U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources at a confirmation hearing in Washington, D.C. In his opening statement, Sams, an enrolled member of the CTUIR, said his lineage is split between the Cayuse, Walla Walla, Yankton Sioux, Cocopah, Dutch and French, the roots of his American Indian family stretching back at least 15,000 years, or “time immemorial.”

He also addressed his lack of experience in the park service.

“Although I have not worn the National Park Service uniform, I have worn the uniform of the United States Navy during war time, and I wear the regalia of my tribe to honor my ancestors and elders,” he said. “These uniforms are reminders of the sacrifices made to protect our homelands and the responsibility to pass down those lands in a stronger state than they are now.”

On a day when committee members seemed to train most of their scrutiny on the other two presidential nominees they were vetting simultaneously — potential appointees to the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission and the U.S.



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian, File

Chuck Sams, a former interim executive director of the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, stepped out publicly for the first time not as an administrator for the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, a nonprofit executive or a veteran, but as the potential director of the National Park Service.

Department of Energy — it was one of a few points of concern for some senators. Since its creation in 1916, the National Park Service has mostly relied on career service staff or experienced state park administrators to lead it. If confirmed, Sams would be the first director without experience in public parks since former director Roger Kennedy was named to the job in 1993.

Sams told the committee he intended to rely on the experience of career staff while making decisions for the park service. He also got backup from his home state senator, Ron Wyden, who extolled Sams’ other experience in his introduction.

“The National Park Service gives us the ability to visit places most Americans would not or could not otherwise reach, and they play a vital role in teaching us. I can’t think of anybody better and more qualified to do that than Chuck Sams, with his unique perspective as the first Native American to lead

the Park Service,” he said. “Quite frankly, this is long overdue.”

But most committee members wanted to talk with Sams about park personnel and maintenance.

A surge in visits to the country’s national parks and historical sites has stretched a shrunken staff and strained the system’s infrastructure. Several senators asked Sams questions about problems in their home state parks: Sen. Mike Lee, R-Utah, on inaccessible boat ramps at Glen Canyon National Recreation Area; Sen. Martin Heinrich, D-New Mexico, on fencing the Valles Caldera National Preserve to prevent cattle grazing; and Sen. Lisa Murkowski, R-Alaska, on a closed road at Denali National Park.

Sams said he was now aware of all of these issues, and more broadly, planned to prioritize building staff morale, advocate for more park funding, improve recruiting and invest in park infrastructure that could stand for the next “50 to 75 years.”



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