

# Sams faces 'huge task' at NPS

By CHRIS AADLAND  
Underscore.news  
and Indian Country Today

WASHINGTON — Record annual attendance numbers. Low morale among employees. Billions of dollars in maintenance needs.

Those are just some of the challenges Chuck Sams will have to tackle as director of the National Park Service after officially taking leadership in a swearing-in ceremony Thursday, Dec. 16.

Sams becomes the first Native American to hold the position and the most recent Indigenous person to hold a high-ranking position in the federal government since Joe Biden became president. His boss will be Deb Haaland, Laguna Pueblo, the Interior secretary and first Indigenous person to hold a cabinet-level position.

Sams' background and citizenship with the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation also means some are optimistic he'll work to improve how the agency and its hundreds of national parks, historic sites, monuments and recreation areas work with tribal nations and incorporate their history and culture.

"Everyone should have access to the outdoors no matter where they live, how much money they have, or what their background is," Haaland said in a press release announcing the swearing in. "Chuck Sams understands the importance of connecting people to nature, and I am thrilled to work with him as the Interior Department works to make our national park system accessible to all Americans."]

Kat Brigham, chair of the CTUIR Board of Trustees, said Sams has a big challenge tackling the needs of the park service but she is hopeful he also will prioritize improving the agency's work and coordination with tribal nations and Indigenous people.



Chuck Sams, the new director of National Park Service and an enrolled member of the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, shakes hands in this undated photo with U.S. Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland. Sams is the service's first permanent director in five years.

"He's got a huge task," she said. "But I hope, eventually, that he'll be able to help us tell our story about our traditions and our culture within the national parks area."

Sams has a 25-year background in tribal administration and nonprofit natural resource and conservation management. That work has included facilitating land transfers and donations to the park service, in addition to working on park system lands with volunteers on conservation and invasive species management, among other related roles in public lands and conservation.

Sams will take over a park service that hasn't had a permanent director since 2017.

Before he was confirmed in late November, a Senate committee tasked with vetting Sams questioned him about his priorities and how he would address some of the more pressing needs of the agency and the 85 million acres it manages. Those priorities, he said, include tackling the agency's \$12 billion maintenance backlog. In 2020, Congress passed a \$6.5 billion bill that aimed to address that backlog after

years of underinvestment.

But for David Lamfrom, one of the most immediate issues is the mood among park service employees. Lamfrom is the vice president of Regional Programs for the National Park Conservation Association and works on community-building and reaching more diverse constituents.

He'd like to see a more diverse park service workforce. But first, he said, the workplace culture and concerns about harassment and gender discrimination have to be addressed, which Sams has recognized as a priority.

"I think building back that trust and morale within the agency is going to be a really top priority," Lamfrom said.

The morale concerns and other staffing issues come amid surging popularity for the park service, with many national parks — such as Zion and Glacier national parks — having experienced record attendance numbers in recent years.

"There's a lot of other issues that he's gonna have to deal with, like the fact is that during the pandemic, America fell in love all over again with our

national parks," Lamfrom said.

In addition to ensuring people can access the parks while making sure they're adequately protected in the face of heavy attendance, he said he'd like to see the agency engage with groups who aren't flocking to park service units and make them more welcoming for all.

"The demographics tell us that that flocking is not consistent across all communities," Lamfrom added. "So there's attention and care that needs to be put into ensuring that communities who have felt disengaged from the parks, or have never felt engaged with the parks, can connect and feel welcome."

Regardless, he said, Sams is "absolutely up for this" and is taking over at an important and potentially "transformational" moment.

In the press release, Sams said he is honored to serve and "incredibly proud to work with the dedicated employees of the National Park Service."

"I have no doubt that together, we'll be able to expand access to the outdoors, protect America's public lands,

and upgrade our nation's infrastructure system," he said.

Organizations such as the National Congress of American Indians and other tribal leaders have been pressuring the park service to improve tribal consultation, improve access to historic and culturally significant sites or better protect them and include Indigenous history and culture as part of each park's experience.

Brigham, who has years of experience working with Sams from his time as an administrator with the tribes, said he has the knowledge and experience to do just that.

"Chuck knows why the land is important to the tribe; we have been taught the need to take care of the land, so the land can take care of us ... he knows the importance of family connecting to the land, traditionally, culturally, and in taking care of the land," she said. "Those are things we don't have to educate him on, as we have had to try and educate other people."

For his part, Sams has said engaging with Indian Country is a top goal, whether that's through improved consultation with tribal nations or incorporating traditional Indigenous ecological knowledge into agency management decisions or incorporating Indigenous history and culture into park experiences.

"As the Park Service's first Native American director, Chuck is well-positioned to balance recreational uses and stewardship with our tribal nations' needs to maintain our traditional and ancestral ties to these lands," NCAI President Fawn Sharp said after Sams was nominated in August.

At the same time, Brigham said she and other tribal leaders are eager to help if he asks for it.

"We're willing to help, because it is going to be a huge task," she said. "We know it's not gonna happen overnight."

## Searchers recover body of missing Boardman woman

East Oregonian

CONDON — The search for a missing Boardman woman is over.

The Gilliam County Sheriff's Office on Saturday, Dec. 18, reported searchers at 11:10 a.m. that day found the remains of Autumn Jones.

"An investigation is taking place, but foul play does not appear to be a factor and the public is not at risk," according to the post of the sheriff's office Facebook page.

"Our hearts and prayers go out to the family of Autumn Jones," Sheriff Gary Bettencourt said in the post. "Although this is not the outcome that we had hoped for, this will give some closure to Autumn's family."



Jones

family she was going for a drive. She called her family around 1:30 a.m. on Nov. 28 and stated she was lost. Using a cellphone application, her family placed Jones in Wheeler County. Law enforcement searched but did not find Jones.

A mail carrier on Nov. 29 reported seeing Jones' car, a red 2014 Volkswagen Jetta, near Fossil. Sheriff's deputies from Wheeler, Morrow and Grant counties coordinated search teams to find Jones in the following days, but the efforts did not find Jones or the car.

Hunters on Dec. 15 found Jones' empty vehicle in a canyon near Condon. The subsequent search involved more than a dozen sheriff's offices, search and rescue teams, other agencies and volunteers.

The sheriff's office also thanked the numerous agencies and volunteers that assisted the search and rescue efforts.

Jones left her family's home in Morrow County on Nov. 27. She told her

## Utah bikes found in John Day

By BENNETT HALL  
Blue Mountain Eagle

JOHN DAY — A Grant County man has been arrested in connection with the theft of multiple expensive bicycles in Utah.

Acting on a tip, Grant County sheriff's deputies converged on a John Day rental property at 2:45 p.m. on Tuesday, Dec. 14, and took one of the residents into custody.

Jacob Dolecki, 27, of Ortonville, Michigan, was arrested on a charge of theft by receiving.

The investigation remains active, according to Sheriff Todd McKinley.

Inside the man's house, deputies reportedly recovered four bicycles valued at \$20,000.

"They were very high-end, carbon fiber mountain bikes," the sheriff said.

According to McKinley, the bicycles found in the house were among 15 high-end

mountain bikes stolen in October as part of a single incident in Moab, Utah, a mecca for mountain biking enthusiasts.

The Grant County Sheriff's Office was brought into the case after the owner of one of the missing bikes spotted his ride in a "For Sale" post on Facebook that originated in John Day.

The post included a picture

of the bike taken in the suspect's backyard. When he saw the photo, McKinley realized he had been there before.

"We got a tip called into the office," McKinley said.

"Staff showed me a picture and I said, 'Yep, I recognize that yard.'"

Authorities are still trying to track down the other 11 stolen bikes.

### Christmas Services Schedule

Saint Elizabeth Catholic Church-John Day  
Saint Anne Mission-Monument

#### Christmas Mass Schedule

December 24th, 5:00pm Christmas Eve Mass  
December 25th, 9:00am Christmas Day Mass  
December 25th, 12:30pm Christmas Day Mass at St. Anne Mission, Monument.

#### New Year Mass Schedule

December 31st 5:00pm New Year Eve Mass  
January 1st 9:00am New Year Mass  
January 1st 12:30pm New Year Mass at St. Anne Mission, Monument.

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