

## Woods wisdom

Goals in running San Bernardino National Forest include post-fire reforestation

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By MARK MUCKENFUSS  
The Press-Enterprise

Jeanne Wade Evans was told she couldn't be a forester.

"Oh, women don't do that," was the response she got in high school when she said she wanted to tromp through the woods for a living.

The daughter of an Air Force fighter pilot who was encouraged by her father to follow in his footsteps probably isn't going to listen, especially after a youth filled with family campouts.

Story continues below



William Wilson Lewis III / The Press-Enterprise

Jeanne Wade Evans, 53, has been the supervisor for the San Bernardino National Forest for the past 3 1/2 years.

A little over three decades later, Wade Evans, 53, took the helm as the supervisor of the San Bernardino National Forest, one of the most diverse and complex national forests in the United States.

During her 3½-year tenure she has had to oversee the production of a forest service plan, major thinning and replanting programs in the forest and a series of wildfires including the Esperanza Fire in which five firefighters were killed.

It's a long way from her early days with the Forest Service in Arizona, when she spent time tagging birds, counting bats and surveying caves and archaeological sites.

Back then, she says, she spent 90 percent of her time in the field, often on horseback.

"I used to ride my horse along the banks of the Verde River (near Sedona) and see cliff dwellings," she says. "I could go all day and not see anyone."

She could also go for a long time without seeing another woman forester.

"There weren't that many women in professional jobs at the time," she says. "I just know there weren't that many women around the table when we met. But I felt like I had some good mentors and support."

Her early years included occasional work on the fire line. In 1988, she was one of two women on a 15-member engine strike team from Arizona that spent a month fighting fires in Yellowstone National Park.

She was named district ranger for Coronado National Forest, south of Tucson, in 1990 and served in that capacity until 1999 when she took a job in Washington, D.C. Her work focused on fire prevention and recovery. She was national program manager for fuels with the fire and aviation management staff.

### **Joining 'Flagship' Forest**

Her stint in the Capitol would have been shorter, but she didn't want to interrupt her youngest daughter's high school years. When she did start looking for a new post, the opening with the San Bernardino National Forest intrigued her.

"I knew about the San Bernardino when I was in Washington, D.C.," Wade Evans says. "This is one of the flagship forests in the country."

Much of her effort since taking the reins has been to continue programs that were already in place.

"There was so much good work going on," she says, "Continuing to support that good work was important."

She has also placed an emphasis on post-fire reforestation.

"Prior to me coming here, we were doing 500 acres per year," she says. "This last year we did 3,000 and we're going to do 3,000 next year. We were having fires burn and not reforesting. We're not going to let that happen any more. We're going to get in there right after fires where it's appropriate."

Her most difficult challenge, she says, has been in handling the deaths of the firefighters on the Esperanza Fire in 2006 during her first year on the San Bernardino National Forest.

"It's a great loss," she says. "The effect on the families and the employees, it was so significant. It stays with people. I don't think I can forget about it. I don't think anybody can."

Michael Dietrich, of Azusa, retired last year as the fire chief on the forest. He calls Wade Evans a people person and says he's been impressed by her performance.

"All the implications of that," he says of the tragedy's aftermath, "all the eyes on the forest if you will. I think she handled it very well, given the complexity and sensitivity of it."

### **'Gets Things Done'**

Dietrich says Wade Evans "has definitely taken on some very tough tasks on the forest. First the number of fires and the seriousness of them, the hazards. ... the very complex special uses. She's definitely task-oriented and gets things done on time."

Sarah Miggins, director of the nonprofit National Forest Association, says Wade Evans has worked with the group to help implement an important fire prevention program.

"The mission of Forest Care is an incentive program for private landowners to remove small green trees and brush around their homes," Miggins says. Wade Evans "was absolutely instrumental in helping us develop that mission."

The program involves a number of agencies, including Cal Fire and state and private forestry groups. Miggins says Wade Evans helped coordinate the effort.

"I would say she's a facilitator," she says. "She's good at putting all the different nodes together."

These days, Wade Evans says her percentage of time on the forest has flipped from her early years. She's lucky to spend 10 percent of her time out of the office, she says.

She often hikes the forest on her days off. She says it keeps her honest.

"It helps me remember what we're here for," she says. "It's the resource we're all here to protect."

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