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# NPS pick has never managed a park, but that may not matter

By Rob Hotakainen | 08/19/2021 12:48 PM EST



Chuck Sams, a former administrator with the the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation who now serves on the Northwest Power and Conservation Council, is President Biden's pick to lead the National Park Service. Northwest Power and Conservation Council

President Biden made history yesterday by selecting Charles “Chuck” Sams III as the first Native American to lead the National Park Service. But there’s one potential problem: The former tribal administrator from Oregon has never managed a park.

“I can’t adequately express my disappointment in this nomination but [am] open to being convinced otherwise,” former North Carolina Supreme Court Justice Robert Orr [said on Twitter](#), complaining that the nominee has “absolutely no experience or background in the NPS or state parks system.”

In the end, that won’t matter, at least legally: While most previous nominees have had plenty of experience in running parks, a 1996 law passed by Congress makes clear that it’s not a necessary qualification.

“The director shall have substantial experience and demonstrated competence in land management and natural or cultural resource conservation,” reads the law, which was changed during the Clinton administration when the post was made a Senate-confirmed position.

That should be an easy hurdle for Sams, 50, who’s currently on the Northwest Power and Conservation Council and earlier served as deputy executive director for the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation.

In announcing the nomination yesterday, the White House noted that Sams has more than 25 years of experience working in state and tribal government jobs and in the nonprofit natural resource and conservation management field ([Greenwire](#), Aug. 18).

Yet Sams, who’s in line to become the 19th permanent NPS director if he’s confirmed by the Senate, is clearly an unconventional pick compared with previous appointees.

Three of the four NPS directors who were confirmed after the 1996 change — Robert Stanton, who was nominated by President Clinton; Mary Bomar, President George W. Bush’s second nominee; and Jonathan Jarvis, who served under President Obama — all had long track records as career officials with the park service. The fourth, Fran Mainella, Bush’s first nominee, led the Florida state park system.

Destry Jarvis, who worked as the NPS director of external affairs during the Clinton administration, said former President Nixon provided the impetus for Congress to change the law.

“You really have to lay the blame for that to Richard Nixon’s appointment of Ron Walker at the beginning of his second term,” said Jarvis, who’s the older brother of Jonathan Jarvis. “Walker had been an advance man from the campaign who knew absolutely nothing about parks or park management or what the National Park Service was. At his first House hearing, he was asked — I was there — a question about Yosemite, and he turned to the park service guy that was accompanying him and said: ‘What state is that in?’ And the room just erupted in laughter.”

Jarvis, who helped write the 1996 law with a Senate staffer, said he would have liked the language on qualifications to be “even more specific,” but added: “What we got was an indicator of the intent of Congress that the National Park Service is not just any old agency, it requires expertise in management.”

## **‘Can’t think of a better person’**

Oregon Democratic Gov. Kate Brown, who wrote a letter to Biden recommending Sams for the job, tweeted that she “can’t think of a better person for the important role,” adding: “I have worked closely with Chuck for many years and have witnessed firsthand his unparalleled service to his tribe, our state, and our nation.”

Oregon’s senior senator, Democrat Ron Wyden, called Sams “my friend” and also congratulated him on Twitter “for earning this historic nomination for tribal communities.”

Advocacy groups and others were also quick to praise Sams, who would be the first permanent director for NPS since Jonathan Jarvis left more than four years ago. The Trump administration left the position vacant, relying on four acting directors to oversee NPS and its 423 park sites.

“We haven’t had a parks chief since 2017, and it’s disgraceful that in the over 105-year park service history, it is yet to be led by a Native American,” said Anna Peterson, executive director of the Mountain Pact, an organization that works with local elected officials across the West on climate and public lands issues.

Phil Francis, chair of the Coalition to Protect America's National Parks, said Sams has "an extensive record working in natural resource and conservation management" and called the White House announcement "long overdue."

"We have pushed hard for a nominee, and we are gratified that President Biden's administration has finally made an announcement," he said. "We urge the Senate to schedule hearings on the nomination as soon as possible."

Two sources familiar with the search told E&E News earlier this month that Sams was one of two candidates in the running for the job after Interior Secretary Deb Haaland said she wanted more diversity in the NPS leadership ranks. Haaland made history herself earlier this year when she became the first Native American to lead the Interior Department ([Greenwire](#), Aug. 6).

"The diverse experience that Chuck brings to the National Park Service will be an incredible asset as we work to conserve and protect our national parks to make them more accessible for everyone," Haaland said in a statement. "I look forward to working with him to welcome Americans from every corner of our country into our national park system."

Theresa Pierno, president and CEO of the National Parks Conservation Association, said Sams has a career record of "navigating difficult issues in an inclusive and caring way."

"As a descendant of the original guardians of our lands, Sams brings a unique and powerful perspective that can help our national parks continue to evolve in the places and stories they preserve and share," she added.

And Diane Regas, president and CEO of the Trust for Public Land, called Sams a "visionary conservation leader with a deep, demonstrated commitment to natural and cultural resources and the communities that depend on them."

"His broad experience — including his leadership roles serving the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, his tremendous prior conservation achievements as director of the Trust for Public Land's Tribal Lands Program, and his positive focus on land restoration, species protection, youth programs and access — give him a uniquely valuable perspective on America's irreplaceable public lands," she said.

Sams' resume includes other stints as the communications director and environmental health and safety officer for the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, president and CEO of Indian Country Conservancy, executive director for the Umatilla Tribal Community Foundation, executive director for the Columbia Slough Watershed Council, executive director for the Community Energy Project, and president and CEO for the Earth Conservation Corps. He's also a former adjunct professor at Georgetown University and Whitman College.

Sams has a Bachelor of Science in business administration from Concordia University-Portland and a Master of Legal Studies in Indigenous peoples law from the University of Oklahoma. He's a veteran of the U.S. Navy and an enrolled member, Cayuse and Walla Walla, of the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, where he lives with his wife, Lori Sams, and their four children.