

Meet newly appointed Air Force Wildland Fire Branch Chief

By AFCEC Environmental Directorate

He's a father of three, an endurance race competitor, and an avid trout fly fisherman. Now, as recently appointed chief of the Air Force Wildland Fire Branch at the Air Force Civil Engineer Center, Brad Shoemaker is ready to tackle some new challenges.

"My vision is for the branch to be an interagency organization, focused on supporting installations with the management of fire-dependent ecosystems, reducing risk to installation and Air Force assets, and supporting fire suppression response when necessary," Shoemaker said.

Shoemaker's diverse skillset is well suited to propelling the program into the future of wildland fire management, said Ben Kindt, chief of the AFCEC Environmental Operations Division.

"Mr. Shoemaker's extensive background, training and education made him a perfect fit for this role, which is critical for delivering high-quality wildland fire and environmental management support to Air Force installations across the country," Kindt said.

The unique wildland fire mission isn't foreign to Shoemaker, who served the last three years as a program analyst at the AFWFB. Prior to that, Shoemaker was the director of emergency services and wildland fire for Yellowstone County, Montana, and area forester for the Montana Department of Natural Resources for the south-central region.

"Each of these positions had a heavy wildland fire component, including mechanical fuel reduction projects, fire suppression and significant interagency project work," Shoemaker said.

As chief, Shoemaker sees his role as multi-faceted, with a strong emphasis on planning, resource management, and communication.

"There are three primary duties," he said. "First is to plan and allocate resources to support field modules and installations with deliverables and tasks. Second is to answer questions and inform leadership about our program and its importance in achieving natural resource objectives in

support of Air Force and Department of Defense missions. Third is to lead teams of field modules and headquarters staff through program planning and hard decisions through honest communication.”

The AFWFB’s role in natural resource conservation is an important one, said Kevin Porteck, Air Force natural resources subject matter expert.

“Effective wildland fire management helps preserve ecosystems and biodiversity, providing a landscape capable of sustaining military testing and training activities now and in the future, while simultaneously conserving our natural heritage,” Porteck said.

Climate change poses new challenges and is shaping the future of the program, he said.

“The future of wildland fire mitigation looks like active management that supports resilient and resistant ecosystems,” Shoemaker added. “This can take many forms depending on the individual ecosystem, but generally it means thinning trees, reducing competition for resources and making an ecosystem healthier. The other benefits include increasing drought resistance, insect and disease infestation and creating better wildlife habitat.”

For anyone interested in a career in wildland fire, Shoemaker has a few words of advice.

“I would tell them that this will be an exciting and expanding field for decades to come,” he said. “I would also tell them to explore their interests past the standard operational wildland fire positions. Some of the most needed skillsets in wildland fire right now are planning, logistics, finance, and information technology. Gaining experience in these non-traditional areas will make them a more competitive applicant with all agencies.”