President Obama has nominated Homer Lee Wilkes, a career employee of the USDA's Natural Resource Conservation Service and currently the head of NRCS's Mississippi office, to become undersecretary for natural resources and environment. That's a key post for environmental policy because it oversees the US Forest Service as well as the much smaller NRCS.

The pick has surprised many observers. High Country news describes the nominee as "an effective unknown . . . who lacks experience in forest issues." The New York Times agrees that Wilkes "is unknown to many forestry, environmental and farmland conservation groups in Washington, D.C.," but suggested that his appointment might elevate the visibility of NRCS programs.

That may be good or bad, depending on your point of view. High Country News speculates that it may mean that "deal-making" conservation may be on the ascendency in the new administration — the role of NRCS is primarily to hand out payments to private-land farmers who agree to help the government achieve its conservation goals. The Forest Service, which is responsible for choosing and implementing management priorities for the nation's forest lands, is in a very different position. If two points make a line, this nomination coupled with that of Tom Strickland, whose chief environmental credential was that he had served on a board that distributed Colorado lottery funds to state parks, as Assistant Interior Secretary for Fish, Wildlife and Parks, may suggest that the administration is more comfortable with the carrot than the stick.

Environmental groups may be disappointed that the rumored front-runner, Chris Wood, Chief Operating Officer of Trout Unlimited and a high-level advisor to the Chief of the Forest Service in the Clinton Administration, did not get the nod (perhaps, the NYT speculates, because he is a registered lobbyist). Still, they are united in their agreement that Wilkes has got to be an improvement over Mark Rey, the former timber industry lawyer who held the post in the Bush II administration.