

Wakimoto Discusses Role as NSF's Incoming Assistant Director of Geosciences

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Roger Wakimoto's adrenaline "is starting to pump," the incoming assistant director for geosciences (GEO) at the U.S. National Science Foundation (NSF) told *Eos* during an exclusive interview at this month's AGU Fall Meeting in San Francisco. Wakimoto, whose scientific expertise is in extreme weather, is scheduled to take charge as head of the NSF directorate for geosciences starting in February 2013.

During his 4-year appointment at NSF, Wakimoto, 59 and an avowed workaholic, will head up the GEO directorate, which has about an \$880 million annual funding portfolio and provides about 55% of federal funding for geosciences basic research at U.S. academic institutions. The directorate currently includes the divisions of atmospheric and geospace sciences, Earth sciences, and ocean sciences. In addition, NSF's Office of Polar Programs is slated to become a GEO division under a realignment plan announced on 7 September; Wakimoto said that shift had "no bearing" on his decision to accept the position.

Wakimoto has served as director of the NSF-sponsored National Center for Atmospheric Research (NCAR) since 2010. He takes the helm from Margaret Cavanaugh, who has served as acting assistant director since the departure of former GEO assistant director Tim Killeen in June 2012, when his term ended; Killeen also had been director of NCAR before coming to NSF.

"This is going to be an enormous responsibility," Wakimoto told *Eos*, explaining why he is excited about his new position. "I think I can help make a difference" in the geosciences.

He said that it is "more important than ever to be part of an organization that funds basic research. [NSF] is really the only agency that truly funds just great ideas. It isn't mission-driven. If a single principle investigator, faculty member, assistant professor has a great idea, if it's well reviewed, it gets funded. They are really into students and postdocs. These are all things fundamental to me in terms of what I believe strongly in." He said that making funding decisions is a huge responsibility that he doesn't take lightly.

Wakimoto noted that although the new position will be challenging, his background and experience would be very useful. "If someone asks me what do I bring to the table that makes me think I can do the job well, I would say that I'm a scientist and a manager. I guess I've been able to do both, balance both," he said.

During his previous move from heading NCAR's Earth Observing Laboratory to becoming the center's director, Wakimoto said that some people wondered "how can someone who is a mesoscale [meteorology] person really oversee a center that does this incredible breadth of activities?" I don't think I had any problems with that because I'm a scientist at heart. And as a manager, I'm very good about meeting and talking to people and trying to understand what they are trying to do. And I can pick it up pretty quickly. I feel I can take those strengths to GEO and it will be similar," he said.

"I have to do it all over again [at GEO] because now there are other disciplines I'm not familiar with. But I'm not scared or intimidated by that at all," he added, noting that GEO has a good team. "You're not there to do it on your own. You're there to rely on good people that have been hired. You listen to their sage advice, and you just help them accomplish their tasks with some gentle nudging. That's what any good manager does."

Wakimoto added that his attitude as a "careful thinker" who does not make rash decisions and who can stay calm "even when there's a firestorm going around me" also should come in handy in the new position.

"I've stared at tornadoes. You cannot get me flustered. Maybe that's part of the reason why I have this personality," said Wakimoto, who has authored or coauthored about 100 peer-reviewed papers in atmospheric sciences and who wants to continue doing research even as head of GEO. "There's nothing you can throw at me that can somehow disrupt me."

He said that with the world confronting major concerns, including climate change and natural hazards, "geosciences is one of the most critical disciplines we have out there." Wakimoto added that climate change is a central focus at NCAR and that he hopes "to take that expertise to NSF."

On a somewhat lighter note, Wakimoto mused that he is not sure if anybody is "ever quite ready" for dealing with the challenging budgetary climate in Washington, D. C. "But I'm not naive about it. Obviously, these are difficult times," he said. "All of the disciplines are worried. My adrenaline isn't pumping because of that. You play the cards you are dealt with, and there are still so many wonderful things you can do."

Becoming head of the GEO directorate "wasn't even on the radar screen" for Wakimoto when NSF deputy director Cora Marrett contacted him in September to ask him to consider the job, he said. Wakimoto said he



Randy Showstack, Eos

Roger Wakimoto, incoming National Science Foundation assistant director for geosciences, at the AGU Fall Meeting

had enjoyed working for the past 7.5 years at NCAR, where he has managed a diverse staff and large facilities, and where he recently had overseen the completion of the largely NSF-funded NCAR-Wyoming Supercomputing Center. That center—which provides advanced computing services to scientists in a broad range of Earth and space science disciplines—was officially dedicated on 15 October.

Wakimoto said that while he was "shocked and overwhelmed" about being contacted by NSF for the [GEO] position, the timing of leaving NCAR following the opening of the supercomputing center "is a nice note to leave on." He said the only thing he regrets about taking the new position is leaving NCAR. "It's just been great. But you know, you move forward, and life is short," he said.

Throughout his academic and professional career, Wakimoto has been affiliated in some way with NSF, including receiving an NSF-funded graduate assistantship and later receiving core funding from NSF during his 22 years as a professor in the department of atmospheric and oceanic sciences at the University of California, Los Angeles, prior to moving to NCAR.

In accepting the GEO position, Wakimoto said that he felt he was providing "payback for [NSF] being so kind to me and supporting all of my research."

"I think you can count on me putting every ounce of time and effort into just doing what I think is best for the [geosciences] community," he said. "I have nothing to gain in this. I want others to succeed."

—RANDY SHOWSTACK, Staff Writer