Chief judge who forwarded anti-Obama email to step down

Contributed by MATT VOLZ
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HELENA, Mont. — A judge who forwarded a racist joke involving President Barack Obama plans to take a reduced caseload starting next year and step down as the chief federal judge for Montana, a U.S. Courts spokeswoman said.

U.S. District Judge Richard Cebull of Billings will take senior status March 18, courts spokeswoman Karen Redmond said.

That will create a vacancy about a year after Cebull asked the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals to open an investigation into his conduct over the email that included a joke about bestiality and Obama's mother. Cebull requested the probe after news about the email became public.

That investigation is not complete and may not be related to Cebull's decision, 9th Circuit spokesman David Madden said. It is not unusual for a judge to take senior status when he is eligible to do so, Madden said.

“You have this issue out here, and I can see how people would want to relate it, but there are a lot of other factors in play,” Madden said.

A judge can take senior status when he or she is 65 or older and has at least 15 years on the bench. A judge with senior status takes a reduced caseload but still draws a salary and can keep a staff of four.

Cebull will vacate his position as chief judge for the state and allow the president to appoint a replacement. That is one of the benefits of senior status: it means adding a judge to the state, Madden said.

Cebull previously admitted he forwarded the email to a half-dozen people Feb. 20 after receiving it from his brother, telling The Great Falls Tribune newspaper that he did so because he disliked Obama, not from racism.

After the story surfaced, Cebull wrote Obama a letter of apology and asked the federal appellate court to investigate his conduct.