

Norton Rose Latin American Head Jumps To McKool Smith

By Keith Goldberg

Law360 (March 7, 2019, 7:10 PM EST) -- McKool Smith on Thursday landed the former head of Norton Rose Fulbright's U.S. energy and Latin American practices along with two fellow energy litigators as the trial firm looks to build both its energy disputes practice and its business south of the border.

At noon on Thursday, Willie Wood wrapped up a Norton Rose Fulbright career that began in 1984 at predecessor firm Fulbright & Jaworski LLP. He then headed across downtown Houston to his new office at McKool Smith, where he will be a firm principal, along with Norton Rose Fulbright colleagues Justin Tschoepe and Lauren Varnado.



William D. "Willie" Wood

Wood did a little bit of everything in his 35 years at his former firm, from developing its Latin American practice to leading the partnership committee and serving on the firm's global advisory board. He said that he enjoyed it all, but that his legal love is energy litigation, and all those responsibilities meant he wasn't getting into a courtroom as often as he wanted.

"It's hard to get trials anymore in most places, and McKool offers me the opportunity to do what I think I do best: be a litigator," Wood told Law360 Thursday. "In my heart, I'm a trial lawyer, and that's what attracted me to McKool."

Wood also said that McKool, with its 185 lawyers and strict litigation focus, has fewer potential client conflicts than his former firm, a global, full-service behemoth with more than 4,000 lawyers.

Wood has run the gamut of energy-related litigation in his career, from contract disputes to fraud, whistleblower and product liability claims. In his international practice, Wood handles both litigation and arbitration disputes stemming from energy development in dozens of countries, as well as international enforcement and investigation actions.

At McKool, he'll be counted on to build out the firm's energy litigation practice, including in Latin America, just as he did at Norton Rose Fulbright.

"It's very simple formula: You have talented people that have a reputation that clients can rely on and trust," Wood said. "There is an appetite and a gap for firms like McKool in the space I've occupied for so many years."

McKool Smith managing partner David Sochia said in a statement Thursday that Wood's "experience both in the U.S. and foreign jurisdictions is unmatched."

"His deep ties in Texas, Mexico, and throughout Latin America will be invaluable to the firm as we continue to grow our energy litigation practice both domestically and internationally," Sochia said. We are very excited about his arrival and his ability to spearhead McKool Smith's expansion into Mexico and Latin America related litigation, arbitration, investigations and insolvency matters."

Joining Wood at McKool is Tschoepe, who represents energy firms and government contractors in state and federal court cases, as well as arbitration cases. Varnado represents oil and gas companies on issues related to asset deals, litigation prevention and preparation and transactional agreements. She also handles disputes involving upstream, midstream and power contracts.

Norton Rose Fulbright said Thursday that global energy co-head John Mael and U.S. environmental head Eddie Lewis, both based in Houston, will share the U.S. energy head post in addition to their current duties.

"We wish Willie all the best in his new endeavor and look forward to possible collaboration opportunities with him at his new firm," Norton Rose Fulbright U.S. managing partner Daryl Lansdale said in a statement Thursday.

And while leaving the only firm he had known since graduating law school wasn't an easy decision, Wood said it was a decision he was ready to make.

"After 35 years, I felt my legacy is pretty well complete at BigLaw, and I've always flirted with the idea of opening my own firm," Wood said. "This is the closest thing that would work for me and my practice."

--Editing by Peter Rozovsky.