

My Time as Forest Supervisor on the Superior National Forest

September 1988 to December 1992

By David A. Filius

In 1987 while working as the Forest Supervisor of the Custer National Forest in Billings, Montana, for Regional Forester Jim Overbay and Deputy Regional Forester John Mumma, I was tapped as the regions top candidate for a GS-15 Forest Supervisor position. At that time the FS had a skill file process for choosing these positions. In other words, an applicant applied once for GS-15 vacancies in general and from those applicants a selected number were assigned to the pool from which selections were made.

After missing out on a couple of vacancies like the North Carolina and Boise NF I was asked in June of 1988 to come to Milwaukee for an interview by the three Eastern Region Regional Foresters, Marita, Jordan, and Payne. In early August while on the Sioux Ranger District in Camp Crook SD, I got a call offering me the job on the Superior National Forest in Duluth. I accepted without hesitation. A chance to be involved with the BWCAW!

The month of August in 1988 just prior to my move was a busy one. The west was in the grips of an incredible drought and it seemed like our world was on fire. The Custer had had the 50,000 acre "Brewer Fire" in late June on the Sioux District near Ekalaka and Camp Crook. There was a big fire burning around Ashland, and another one in the Storm Creek Drainage near Red Lodge. Also during this time there were huge fires on the Lolo, the Helena, the Lewis and Clark, and in Yellowstone Park and elsewhere around the west.

A pall of smoke and ash hung over Billings after August 20 when the Yellowstone Fires went crazy. As Supervisor of the Custer, I was on the Greater Yellowstone Committee with line officers from Yellowstone and the six NFs surrounding the park and we were meeting for fire strategy briefings frequently in West Yellowstone. Anyway, it was in this hectic climate that we moved out of Billings and to Duluth.

For the first time, my wife Betty and I were transferring out of region and leaving our four children behind. We started out in hot dry smokey weather with two vehicles, a Coleman trailer and a canoe. When we arrived in Duluth it was Labor Day, and from the looks of things the whole region was evacuating because the highways south were bumper to bumper with cars and boats. We were just getting our introduction to the recreational attraction of the Minnesota lake country and to the heavier populations of the mid-west.

The Superior NF was located in the Duluth Federal Courthouse/ Downtown Post Office building. The Supervisors Office occupied parts of the basemant and the first three floors with other agencies intermingled. Compared to the Custer there seemed to be plenty of people. Larry Gadt was the deputy, Jack Blackwell-Rec/wilderness Staff, Bob Burton-Lands staff, Al Groven-Forest Engineer, Bob Joens-Fire Staff, Connie McGurk-Admin officer, Jim Rogers-Planning Staff, Bob Pokela- Timber Staff, and Kathy Andrews- FS Secretary. District Rangers were: Tom Peterson-Tofte, Susan Rutherford- Grand Marais, Roger Baker- Kawishiwi, Nory Hunze-Lacroix, and Dave Thom-Laurentian. Isabella was vacant and filled shortly by Mary Mumford.

It didnt take long to understand that the Superior was a complex, busy forest. The Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness soaked up a good deal of organizational energy because of the array of commercial operators like outfitters, resorters, camps etc., who each depended in their own way on how we handled our permit and reservation system, or how we interpreted the 1978 BWCAW Act.

The Superior's timber program also demanded a good deal of our energy. We were offering 97mmbf at a time when pulp markets were just starting to improve. The forest actually had a pretty well balanced program with good programs in recreation, wildlife, fire, land exchange, engineering, cultural resources etc.

We were also still going through the last stages of a significant mid-eighties RIF or reduction in force, that was necessitated by a cut in special BWCAW impact funding. The Forest had hired lots of extra employees that were no longer funded. The employees who remained were feeling pretty scarred and tender over the RIF because fellow employees had lost their jobs and many had to move elsewhere on or off the forest to retain a job.

At this same time we had just concluded negotiated settlement agreements on most of the contested issues of the forest plan and were starting a blitz effort to complete Forest Plan implementation analyses known as OAs or Opportunity Analyses, on each ranger district.

All of this was briefly how I found the forest in 1988. To discuss the goings on during my four year tenure I'll break it into topic areas as follows:

BWCAW: The 1978 legislation created a Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness that included both motorized and paddle only lakes, some divided down the middle. It and the earlier 1949 Air Ban, and the 1964 Wilderness Act had together completely disrupted what was a growing and profitable fly in resort business and a booming economy built around tourism and logging. The local communities didnt appreciate the federal heavy handed classification as Wilderness, but of course outside the area, in the Twin Cities and around the country the idea of preserving the unique area as wilderness where man was only a visitor was vastly popular and held sway.

When I came to the forest in 1988, environmental groups had appealed, and were later to sue us for refusing to close three motorized (truck) portages that joined motorized lakes. They insisted that motor boats and equipment could be portaged by people assisted by portage wheels. The Chief asked us to test the idea, and so in 1989, employees gathered for a project of health monitored hauling of various sized motor boats across the three portages. We found the job physically possible, in most cases, but incredibly difficult and unreasonably taxing. Health professionals agreed. To convince the Chief, I and two District Rangers and the RFs went to Washington and convinced him. He subsequently ruled that the portages would stay open. The appellants sued, and we won the court case. They appealed and we lost. The next step, we hope is a petition to have a rehearing by the court en banc.

Besides a lot of day to day arguments from users over permits, towboats, reservations, violations, etc, our next big deal in the BWCAW was the undertaking of a wilderness wide OA intended to correct as many of the management problems as the 78 legislative constraints allowed. Mainly we focused on correcting problems of overcrowding. In 1990 we moved our analyst Gordon Karlson into the planning shop and assigned him the project leader role. In 1991 we asked the public to identify the issues or problems they wanted resolved, and in 1992 we assembled a citizen task force of user group representatives and had them debate the issues, recommend alternatives, and point out impacts and mitigation measures.

Later in 1992, our own interdisciplinary team prepared alternatives in a draft EIS. Our preferred alternative, if we can implement it without much modification, will go a long way to eliminate crowding. The production of this effort I consider to be the crowning resource achievement to occur on my watch as Forest Supervisor. It involves establishing lower capacity levels for our travel model, lower quotas at the entry points and lower party size. The latter is really being called a foul by the commercial interests and we are taking a lot of heat on it.

The other BWCAW accomplishment was the formation of a User Education Consortium that produced a very well crafted video that all BWCAW users are asked to view as a way for us to communicate to them about wilderness rules and no trace ethics. A big first step in user education for wilderness not only in the BWCAW but in the country.

ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE: When I came from the Custer it had just been through the imminent threat of being turned over to the BLM in a Pres. Reagan inspired BLM/FS Interchange. Seeing how employees reacted to that possibility and the resulting effect on morale and productivity, convinced me that jerking organizations around was not something to do lightly. Nevertheless, on the Superior in 1989 our leadership team found that our program of work was 2 million dollars over budget. I asked everyone to go back and eliminate non-essentials, but they came back still \$1mm in the hole and we realized our fixed costs were too high and needed to be dealt with. That fall our vacant deputy position was filled by John Twiss and I asked John to assemble a team to look at our costs practices and recommend ways that to reduce expenses. We wanted to focus primarily on the SO and on our organizational structure.

In December of 1989, the Twiss team produced a report that recommended a substantial reduction in SO staffing and expense and the closure of two ranger districts. Ouch! We asked our planner/public affairs officer Jim Rogers to lead the staff in recommending specific SO staffing adjustments and John and I considered the best approach to the district closure recommendation. It didnt take long to see that the district offices in Ely, Grand Marais and Aurora couldnt be closed. That got us down to considering Tofte and Isabella and I couldnt see how we could stand the political gaff of closing both places. Therefore it came down to the most isolated unit, the one in the community of least services and the one most easilly absorbed by other units...Isabella.

To make a long story short we were able to accomplish that without RIF; with placement of every employee either on-forest or off-forest into jobs as good or better than they'd had and we did it in three months. Naturally there were some hurt and impacted employees and the local Stoney River Township in Lake County was angry but we got it done, saved big bucks and put the savings into the remaining districts. In the SO we reduced 22 positions all thru attrition, and went from a seven staff organization to a four and a half staff configuration with the fire staff shared with the Chippewa NF.

I look on that as a significant management achievement but unfortunately those efforts usually go unapplauded both internally and externally and leave some hurts that take a long time to heal. The remaining five districts agreed to strive for an 80/20 ratio of fixed to variable costs and all of those efforts helped us to get the forest on a fairly stable financial footing, considering the current instability of government funding in these times of serious federal deficit.

LANDS: The Lands program on the Superior during this period was working extremely well. We were making our land exchange targets each year as well as the targets of other forests. We completed the resort buyout program in the wilderness, we made a large trade with Potlatch and several with the Trust for Public lands and had several opportunities with L&WCF money to acquire other available and important property within the boundary. We were also making trades to block up our ownership whenever possible. The most difficult lands challenges were in dealing with Cook County who insisted that we exchange federal lands in the Gunflint Trail corridor that we were not willing to exchange. That one is going slowly.

WORKFORCE: One of the bigger internal challenges we faced during my tenure here, was our effort to meet the Chiefs direction to achieve workforce diversity by adding more women and minorities to mirror the mix of gender and race found in the general population. This direction was a result of the class action suits and the consent decree in the PSW Region that caused such a commotion. On the Superior we had a lot of employees who weren't very mobile. Most of them were white male technicians in lower grade positions, and the supply of women and minorities who wanted to come to NE MN was small. Nevertheless we tackled the chore, made every effort to outreach to qualified women and minority candidates before we advertised vacancies and then whenever we could, selected those candidates. This whole project has caused tension because today the FS is a shrinking organization and job opportunities don't just fall into one's lap. So far we've done real well in finding white women candidates, but in the next couple of years we need to do better at finding qualified and willing minorities and we need to work harder at retention. White males are feeling quite disenfranchised and stuck at their position and grade. Hopefully, this transition will pass in a few years and we will have achieved the diverse workforce we are seeking. In time we'll be better and stronger because of it.

TIMBER: The Timber program on the Superior was just pegged by the Forest Plan at an ASQ (allowable sale quantity) of 97mmbf in 1986. Actually it could have been as high as 120mmbf/yr but at that time the big pulp mills were still not fully on line, and demand was still low. Pulp was only selling for \$2.00 per cord and sawtimber made up only a small part of the total. Each year the demand got closer to 97mmbf. Before that happened however some environmental groups got involved. They felt that since our program was running deficit, ie below cost, we should have a lower ASQ. They appealed, then they sued. The court ordered us to reduce the sell-offer to a compromise 85mmbf/yr for two years while we reanalysed the basis for our ASQ in what was called the Chief's Remand Analysis. We'll the reanalysis still came out at 97mmbf/yr.

Meanwhile however our field people were starting to express concerns that they couldnt find enough unconstrained sawtimber or pulpwood to meet our ASQ committments, even though our data seemed to indicate it was out there. That question occupied a lot of time, particularly w/ respect to sawtimber harvest levels all through 1992. Where we left it was that we would maintain a ST offering of 8mmbf until the end of the 86-95 decade and then sort it all out in a forest plan revision. Likewise with the pulpwood harvest.

FIRE and AVIATION

This was another area that got a lot of attention while I was here. Minnesota had had some bad fire years that cost a lot of money. The DNR and the FS and the NPS and several others all had their own fire departments. A coordinated effort was underway when I got here to work together on large firess from our own independent locations and we we still had separate dispatch facilities and fire caches. We tackled two things, developing a MN interagency fire center (MIFC) that we decided should be in Grand Rapids, and a centralized fire cache that we felt should also be in GR. Getting the cache moved from Ely was a big battle. The community screamed like a mashed cat and protested to every one who would listen but for a coordinated interagency effort having the cache in the MIFC location just made too much sense and GR was the more central location.

During this period we also had a number of studies imposed on us to justify the retention of our three DeHaviland Beaver Float Planes based at our Sea Plane in Ely. These planes are the pack strings of the lake country and get used for aerial surveys, fire retardent dropping, and hauling personnel and freight for the FS and other state and federal agencies. Each time we were able to justify keeping them but it's always a scare. They really are a useful resource. In fact we decided in 1992 to prefer them over the contract helicopter that was getting too expensive to keep.

In many respects, the Superior is off the beaten path with some of the controversy that is swirling around the FS these days. We have not been caught up in the hysteria of the spotted owl controversy that has disrupted the west coast. We have not had major fires in the magnitude of the west. We do not have the big drug busts common on the coasts, or the constant high levels of appeal on every project, common to some forests. We did host the 10,000 member Rainbow Family in 1990 and we did successfully play a major role in halting the use of herbicides on this and the other Lake States NFs. Another achievement, probably one of the few personal ones was the annual Timber Wolf Coordination meeting that we've had each winter to get line officers and researchers all

working in harmony and at the same speed toward eastern timber wolf recovery in the Lake States. This effort and the herbicide ban has also helped us in moving towards more sub regional coordination on a number of topics

As I prepare to leave the forest we seem to be pretty well structured to take on the next few years. The challenges ahead include reaching the parity we are trying to achieve in workforce diversity by 1995, purchasing and incorporating expensive GIS technology into our project and forestwide planning, and then gearing the analysis for the first decade revision of the forest plan. New issues such as protecting viable levels of neo-tropical bird habitat, getting fully into ecosystem management, oldgrowth management and bio-diversity, more interagency and interforest partnerships to share people and costs, will all have to be factored in.

From the standpoint of facilities we have a new ranger station for the Laurentian District in Aurora as a result of the old Aurora and Virginia Districts combining, a brand new Ranger Station in Cook for the LaCroix Ranger District in 1992, and upcoming construction for a new Ranger Station in Grand Marais beginning in 1993. We also plan to buy the currently leased MIFC building in Grand Rapids and after that we hope to build a new ranger station in Ely across from the International Wolf Center. We have surplus buildings at the Isabella Work Station but those might be used by a Minnesota Conservation Corps program being discussed.

The Forest Supervisors staff in December of 1992 consists of Connie McGurk still as Admin Officer, Jim Rogers still in LM&P, Duane Hanson in Rec/W/Lands/PA/CR, Bob Pokela in Resource Support, Rich Lasko in Fire and Aviation (shared w/ the Chippewa), ~~and~~ Kathy (Andrews) Hadrich as FS Secretary. The District Rangers are Nory Hunze still at LaCroix, Tom Peterson now at Grand Marais, Larry Dawson at Tofte, Dave Thom still at Laurentian, and T. Angela Cook at Kawishiwi, and lots of other good people besides.

*and Kathy
McAllister
as Deputy.*

This is certainly not a complete history. For example I could write about the Resort Naturalist Program, The school wilderness ethic program, initiated by folks at Tofte, our growing winter sled dog use, the accomplishment of a unique partnership intitated by Gary Ekman with the Telephone Pioneer organization and others to build easy access fishing piers on lakes outside the wilderness.

This national forest is constantly engaged in the progressive improvement of management and it's fun to be involved with it and with the fine people both in and out of the service that make it happen.

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