

An Interview with Robert G. Delk

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0:00:01.8 James Wall: Alright. So, it is Tuesday May 24th, 2022. And we are in Denver, Colorado at the Sonesta Hotel. And we're speaking with Bob Delk on behalf of the National Museum of Forest Service History. A few disclaimers, if you need to stop the interview at any time, pause the interview at any time, you can always do that. The other big sort of thing to know is that this interview will not become public, in other words, until after we archive it and you approve the version that you want. So we'll send you the footage of this interview, and if there's anything in there that you want to clip out, you just let me know.

0:00:47.4 Bob Delk: Okay.

0:00:48.0 James Wall: So feel free to fire away. But with that being said, could you tell me when and where you were born?

0:00:56.0 Bob Delk: September 25th, 1940, in East St. Louis, Illinois.

0:01:06.3 James Wall: Let's see. So, when you were growing up, were you interested in the outdoors, the forest, the streams, were you drawn to that part of the country?

0:01:19.4 Bob Delk: Yeah. Yes.

0:01:21.1 James Wall: And did you get... How, in other words, did you come into hydrology as a topic? Because in your time, it must have been in its infancy as a academic subject, right?

0:01:38.0 Bob Delk: Yeah. I was, I had a degree in forestry and went to work upon graduation in North Idaho on the Clearwater National Forest. And let's see, I guess I was... I'm sorry, got my own schedule wrong. When I got out of school, I went to the Fremont National Forest as a forester and was there, that's in Oregon, and was there for a year and then was about to be drafted into the Army in 1963. So I enlisted, it gives you some ways to get what you want, if there's anything you could possibly want. But anyway, so I did three years in the Army, got out of the army, went to Orofino, Idaho, and did the timber work, all the logging work that one does as a forester and they had a man working there, Dale Pfankuch, who was the forest hydrologist, and I don't even think they used the term "hydrology" in those days. This would've been again in 1966.

0:03:00.2 James Wall: Probably watershed management, manager or something.

0:03:01.7 Bob Delk: Something like that. That sounds more like it. Yeah. And he was just an interesting fellow, plus at that time, we were doing a lot of logging on the North Fork of the Flathead because the Dworshak Dam was being built and about to complete and would stop the use of the river to transmit logs. They were, they had been floating logs from there down to Lewistown, Idaho forever. And this meant it was coming to a stop, so as a result, they were getting as much down as they could and they were really tearing up a lot of stuff. And I don't think that I realized all that, but this gentleman shows up and we get talking and without rambling on about it, I just became interested [coughing] in what he was doing, what he was talking about, how he went about it.

0:04:03.5 Bob Delk: And he would, when he would get out to our area, he covered the whole forest, but when we'd get to our area, he would stop and talk with us. Because, when I say "us,"

Dave Rosgen was also who I worked with and interested in the same things, and this guy was bringing that out. For other reasons, I decided, "Okay, I've done a year, I have GI Bill. I'm going to go to... Back to school and get a master's, which I did. And that was University of Arizona. And I went into their Watershed Program because of the interests that I had developed on the Clearwater. So spent two years there in school and then came out and went, was assigned to the regional office as a trainee hydrologist, and a year later went to the Flathead National Forest as their first forest hydrologist.

0:05:12.9 James Wall: So, it's...A lot of people seem to start out on the Clearwater. But during the time that you're talking about, this is not the first time I've heard about this, that Idaho in the... In the 60s was tearing up its rivers. And the effects of course had been going on for a long time in terms of the type of logging, the amount of logging, not paying any attention to sediment buildup or erosion or anything like that, all these issues. So that was a jumping off point for you, a motivating factor of going into watershed, you would say?

0:05:50.1 Bob Delk: Yes. And it seemed, it just didn't seem... Oh, hard to place it, but it just didn't seem like good management... It didn't seem logical to cut down a bunch of trees. And, "Oh, by the way, while we're cutting the trees down, let's rip up the soil, the brush, the grass, anything else that's growing under". Particularly if you would like to have trees come back, why destroy the site? And why make roads that as soon as it rains, it erodes? Because the roads are made steep, improper ditches, improper or no culverts. Why did they do that? And I just thought it was illogical. And then meeting Dale and also having the GI Bill and being a bit interested in this. That's why I said, "I think I will give this a go". And that's how I got to Arizona and spent two years to get my master's in Watershed Management.

0:07:01.6 James Wall: And you made your way to the Flathead, and you were the first forest hydrologist on the Flathead, you said.

0:07:06.9 Bob Delk: Right. Right.

0:07:07.8 James Wall: Now when you got to the Flathead, what type of issues did you see there? Were there similar issues to what was happening on the Clearwater in terms of the effects that had been taking place? What was the water like on the Flathead?

0:07:21.8 Bob Delk: The Flathead was pretty... My recollection, as I say, the Flathead was pretty clean compared to the Clearwater. There were isolated spots where logging was a bit rough on hillsides, for example, in that West Coast stuff, and even into the Clearwater, there was something Highline, hauling of etcetera, etcetera. It did not have that on the Flathead, it wasn't quite as rough a country, and the trees were smaller, than they were in the coastal and Clearwater forests. So, it was pretty much done by logging them out with equipment and generally that equipment was a bulldozer of some sort, and they would simply hook onto two, three, four logs and drive down the hill wherever they happened to be. And of course, going down the hill with these logs, he had to control it, and you control it by dropping the blade, and so they were digging major areas on the hillside. Well, that didn't look good, but, so is there any problem? Well, of course, as soon as the rains began, then all these areas are eroding. And, in a very short period of time, we actually got them to stop doing that, by simply building a normal road that follows, road construction logic at slope percent and that sort of thing, and build a few or not build, but put in culverts and run water where water can run without tearing things up. So yeah, I think we made a few improvements on

the Flathead, but I think it was also easier to do it there than it would've been on the Clearwater.

0:09:41.9 James Wall: Was that because you had a better forest supervisor? A bit more. Because it seems like there's a continuum of people, the hydrologists that have worked in this era of... A few of them had nothing but great things and great bosses, and they were welcomed where they went. And it seems like a lot more people had district rangers that didn't, either openly hated them or were indifferent, and made that known and they didn't know what they were supposed to be doing, and they really weren't getting the support that they should be getting. Where would you say your early career fell on that continuum?

0:10:22.4 Bob Delk: I think on the Clearwater, that's correct. Now keep in mind, at the level I was at that period of time, I almost never saw the supervisor, district ranger maybe a little more often, but I was pretty far down the... Not many people were under my pay list. So, but I think that there was not a lot of help from the management of the Clearwater. And that's why Dale Pfankuch's work was difficult and also quite impressive because he just quietly went about business and improved things. He didn't get in a big fight with people, he just went around and he would try to explain things and he was very good at it. And you can ask any region, any, of our hydrologists of my age in Region One, and they'll say the same things about about Dale. He just was a fabulous, fabulous guy. But back to the Flathead, actually it's a bit more humorous than useful, but at a... Let's see, I got out in '69 and was there for, in Missoula, so along about the summer of 1970, I was told my training was over and I was, there's an opening on the Flathead you don't have to take it, but they need a hydrologist. I said, "Oh, Flathead is nice.

0:12:08.4 Bob Delk: I'll go". So I transferred from Missoula to Kalispell, and had been there a week or two, maybe as many as three, I don't really remember. And I found out there's some other new guys coming in: a soil scientist, a geologist, I'm sorry, a fisheries biologist and a landscape architect, and then of course a hydrologist, so the four of us. And, now we're all arrived, we're all brand new, and the forest supervisor calls us in, and he was an old-time forest supervisor. He believed that trees should be cut, "We're here to log, that's what we do". Particularly on a heavy forest area like the Clearwater, they had a lot of good timber and they, there should have been logging. But he didn't see anything other than logging, but he met us and, asked us to introduce ourselves, we did. And he said, "Well, I've been told that you guys are an interdisciplinary team. Now I have no idea what that is, and I don't know exactly what it is you're supposed to do here, but the region has given me the money to pay your salaries. So, I'm happy that you're here. If I can do anything to help you, let me know. But otherwise, you just go about your business". So he turned out to be a friendly and not a person that stopped us at all. Didn't give us a great deal of support, but he was...

0:13:49.1 Bob Delk: It could have been a lot worse. Then he retired and we got a new supervisor in, whose name I can't remember, but if you look it up, it would have been, oh, '71 or '72, if for some reason you want to look that up. But he was a very dynamic guy and he... I think he wanted to do everything. So yes, he wanted to log, yes, he wanted to build roads, and yes, he wanted to do it right, and yes, he wanted to protect everything. So he was a good guy to work for, and I think the four of us rather enjoyed him and what we did.

0:14:36.8 James Wall: So, what were... Coming on in basically the first generation of the "ologists," as they say, the specialists, what were some of the big... Obviously everybody always says roads, building roads was big. But was there a certain project that you can point to that was

reflective of the time, of the priorities you were trying to set, the biggest thing you needed to fix and deal with on these early years?

0:15:16.0 Bob Delk: It's embarrassing, I'm blank for a minute on the name of the Ranger District, up at the end of the Hungry Road. Oh, Hungry Reservoir, I should say, it's not Spotted Bear, I don't think. Anyway, the timber people and the district ranger and all wanted to build a road up a certain area up, leaving the South Fork of the Flathead and heading a bit northerly and into some of the tributaries to that.

0:16:00.8 Bob Delk: And our soil scientists said, "This is not a good thing, this whole countryside is unstable, building a road here is going to be dangerous and maybe un-useful." Well, so they built it and it was a good-sized road, and it had been almost not used, perhaps it had been used a little. But one day, driving back from work, one of the engineers coming back down the new road fortunately sees it coming, gets stopped in time, but a whole half of the hillside just went right in, collapsed, exactly like the soil scientists told them it would. And they picked at that for long after I left [chuckle] I left there in whenever 44, I mean, I guess '74. But, and I suppose they fixed it and did whatever they did, but the point is he predicted this as a major event and they were lucky they didn't lose a guy, he was very close when it went down. So those things did happen, and it had to do more, I think, with ignorance, not fully understanding how nature works. Especially some of the engineers, they're great at building things, but some of the things that bend into it, they don't... Either they don't want to spend time or effort or are they really don't understand it. And I'm not critiquing engineers, I even have friends that are engineers...

[laughter]

0:17:56.4 Bob Delk: But no, it's just a different discipline, a different way of doing things. And sometimes they're such a. "We want to get it done and get it done soon and get it done right," that they, some things bite them.

0:18:12.4 James Wall: So it sounds like a failure to collaborate, go it alone...

0:18:17.4 Bob Delk: Yeah.

0:18:17.5 James Wall: The siloing of the Forest Service that I think one of the great victories that people seem to be describing is that at some point hydrologists began and rangers stopped fighting each other so much, people began to work more as a team in terms of... You were talking about the freshman class of specialists instead of trying to do their own things by themselves. I've heard stories like that where it's like, "Well, we did finally start working together". Did you see that coming together at some point where finally engineers are at least deferring and asking for your advice when it came to building roads? Rangers are deferring when it comes to a cut that might not be good for the environment, things like that?

0:19:13.0 Bob Delk: I did see that. And, I think that did occur not only on the Flathead, this is again, during the '70s. Remember I left the Flathead in 1974 and only... And left the Forest Service and then went back in '78 for the Washington office, left there in '81 also leaving the Forest Service again. And this was... And I never went back. So, I... What their latest thirty years is, I'm not sure, but yes, from what you said I think that's correct. I think as early as the early '70s, the Forest Service was making a definite effort at trying to put things together and do it right by working with

each other as opposed to fighting each other. There's always that individual, but by and large, I think it was better in '74 when I left than it was when I got there in '70. I have no idea what it's like today of course.

0:20:27.5 James Wall: So what was that first break that you took from the Forest Service '74 to '78, I think you said?

0:20:32.8 Bob Delk: I went to work for the BLM in Denver. It was a four-man unit, involved in coal and oil rehabilitation. And it was our position that when a rehab was about to be offered, we would make some reviews of it. "What are they doing? Are they doing the right thing? Who's doing it?" Etcetera, etcetera.

0:21:05.0 James Wall: So, you going to the BLM was not... Was it getting fed up with the Forest Service and going to the BLM or this was just a good opportunity?

0:21:13.8 Bob Delk: No. No, it was a good opportunity. I'm... Kalispell itself was changing in a way that I really didn't like, and now I'm still talking thirty years ago, it's impossibly changed. It's... I'm just amazed at what has happened to it, I'm glad I'm not there.

0:21:38.3 James Wall: It's infamous now. It's the most gentrified part of Montana.

0:21:43.9 Bob Delk: So, I just got... I've been doing this for five years and it looks like I'm going to keep up doing it for five or ten or twenty and I'd just like to do something different. It was also attempting a grade increase because I was a GS-11, it was a 13 job but if you took the 12 and worked one year, you'd get to 13. And that's what happened. And that was impressive too, or impressive is the wrong word. It was one of the set rewards to get that grade and pay more money. And then here I was in Denver, Denver was a lot smaller then than it is now. And also, the job was really in, nationwide, we had projects from Alabama to Oregon. And so, there was quite a bit of travel, and I enjoyed that part too.

0:22:47.5 James Wall: I see. So, when you went back in '78, what was it that drove you back to the Forest Service?

0:22:53.6 Bob Delk: If you must... Doing all these interviews, you must have heard of Dave Falletti?

0:22:58.1 James Wall: Dave Falletti?

0:23:00.0 Bob Delk: Okay. I guess not. Dave Falletti is one of our legends. And back in '78 he and another fellow were in California on the ocean. I think they were body surfing or something. Anyway, he hit a rock and it killed him. And a week or two later the boss, the Director of Watershed in Washington called me and said, "I want you to take Falletti's job." And I said, "No, you've made a big mistake here". [chuckle] I said... He said something about, "You and Dave are... You seem like you're a lot alike and all that." And then I said, "That's not really the case, Dave and I are really very different, we were friends, I liked him, he had a great sense of humor, but I just don't think that's..." Anyway, he kept it up. And, once again, I was, "Okay, I've been here three years, it's a GS-13, now this is a 14 job and I'm 36 years old, that's not bad. And, going to Washington, well, I wonder about that. Maybe I should rethink it, it might be interesting". Anyway, I talked myself into

it and then I took it and that was good.

0:24:31.4 James Wall: So, what kind of work were you doing when you took his job and went to Washington?

0:24:39.5 Bob Delk: Mike Barton who was the Chief of Watershed then, I don't think that's the right title, but whatever his title was. He told me that, "I want you to represent the forest hydrologists. I want the forest hydrologists, every one of them, to have influence here in the chief's office. And I want you to be the one to find out what it is that they want, how they want to do it and how do we go about in the chief's situation to get things like that done?" So that's essentially what I did. The only boring—that's not even the right word. It was not hydrologically technical; it was more personnel stuff. Now, it was interesting and fascinating, because some of the guys were really cool and doing some great things, and I enjoyed whipping over to here or there and seeing what's going on. But I wasn't doing any of the hydrology in that job and that was a little disappointing. But anyway...

0:25:55.1 James Wall: I don't think that's the first time someone's described the Washington office as not the most satisfying place to work.

[laughter]

0:26:03.9 James Wall: It's usually the most common interpretation is you go there and you realize it's not necessarily your cup of tea and then you go back to doing something else.

0:26:17.6 Bob Delk: Yeah.

0:26:17.7 James Wall: So, it was that it had gotten away in Washington from having sort of a real grip on the science and that you were pushing technical boundaries and looking at the science itself, that it was more of a politics or people managing type of job.

0:26:32.7 Bob Delk: That's right.

0:26:34.7 James Wall: And so, this was your sort of last posting in the Forest Service?

0:26:39.1 Bob Delk: That's right, yes.

0:26:39.6 James Wall: So how many years was this in the last one, the last job that you were on?

0:26:44.7 Bob Delk: You mean in Washington?

0:26:47.3 James Wall: Mm-hmm.

0:26:47.5 Bob Delk: Three.

0:26:47.5 James Wall: I see.

0:26:48.0 Bob Delk: '78-'81.

0:26:50.1 James Wall: So, what was your internal monologue about leaving and why did you decide to leave the outfit when you did?

0:27:08.6 Bob Delk: Maybe it's because of my personality is perhaps not manageable, I don't know. Mike Barton, and I haven't seen him in years, was a very impressive individual, both technically competent and socially competent, knew how to deal with people, how to manage people. And he had personally picked the people on his staff because he felt like at this grade level and all the work that we have to do, you've got to do this part. And because I have too much to do over here, I can't do your job and your job and your job, you've got to do those things. And that's the way he managed, that's the way he worked. The guy that replaced him was just the opposite, that you did everything his way. But he wasn't even a water guy, he was, and I'm not going to tell you, give you names on...

0:28:24.2 Bob Delk: You can look it up and figure it out if you want to, but he just simply could not bring himself to let us go out in the field and do things. And one of the things that came... When I worked for Mike and I got a call from the forest hydrologist in Arizona someplace, I'd just get an airplane ticket and I'd be down there and doing what I could to help him and do what he wanted done. This guy demanded a letter from the superintendent of any forest before any of us would go to visit there. So, if we were not formally invited by the superintendent then we shouldn't go. And I just found that I didn't want to deal with that, so.

0:29:26.3 James Wall: Yeah. Too much red tape.

0:29:28.9 Bob Delk: I got out.

0:29:32.0 James Wall: Can't blame you. Sounds like a classic bureaucrat. [laughter]

0:29:38.7 Bob Delk: Yeah. Yep.

0:29:39.0 James Wall: So, what was that transition like to leaving the outfit and what did you do in the years after that after leaving?

0:29:46.5 Bob Delk: Well, leaving the outfit. Yeah. They're... [chuckle] I've kind of said, don't know if it's fair and I was not in the Marine Corps. I was in the Army, but I... The Forest Service reminds me of the Marine Corps of the government service [chuckle] because it's, "Gung-ho, get it done. Good people, bright people, and it's go, go, go". And there are other agencies that are a little bit less, laid back that aren't getting as much done perhaps. So, no, I had a... And still have a great deal of respect for the Forest Service. It's just that at that time, that position, I just simply couldn't deal with it, didn't want to deal with it. And that was making me, forcing me back to Montana which is where I wanted to be. So, that was my plan of departure. "If I can come up with something in Montana, then I'm on my way".

0:30:53.9 James Wall: And so, where did you settle back in Montana? Did you go...

0:30:56.6 Bob Delk: Here.

0:30:57.4 James Wall: Oh, you went back to Denver?

0:31:00.8 Bob Delk: Oh, I'm sorry. We're not in where my home are we, no, [chuckle] I went to Billings, Montana.

0:31:04.7 James Wall: Oh, okay.

0:31:05.4 Bob Delk: I forgot we're in Denver. Sorry.

[laughter]

0:31:07.8 James Wall: I did too for a minute.

0:31:09.2 Bob Delk: Yeah, [laughter] Well, no, I got a job in Billings, Montana and I've been there ever since.

0:31:13.8 James Wall: I see. So, let's see. I just have a few questions and I'll let you go. Same questions I sort of finish up with everybody. It's interesting to see the different responses, but if there is a thing you miss the most about the job, about being in the Forest Service, what would that be?

0:33:04.4 Bob Delk: I think that it has become an interagency... That's the wrong word, what's the word I'm looking for? An agency that operates in a good way, a way that is functional... I don't know why I can't think of the right word. I just think they're really organized to do good land management. I also think they do a fairly decent job in water resources, which is very important. Now, I have talked with some people, old friends and they say, "Oh, I don't know, it's because you're not here you don't see it," but there's some that feel that watershed has actually kind of slipped in the Forest Service, from the central office, is it part of our duty? If so, that's too bad, but I don't see it, but I'm on the outside. I look at them as a competent, well managed agency including water resources. And yeah, I miss part of that because I haven't done that since I left.

0:33:13.7 James Wall: I see. Do you have a favorite time in your Forest Service career? Not necessarily where you might have, think you accomplished the most, but a time, a place where you were having the most fun?

0:33:30.1 Bob Delk: Yeah. The early '70s when I was on the Flathead, the Forest Service was directed to do some work in wilderness areas. We had the South Fork of the Flathead which was a Wild and Scenic River and also under the Wilderness Act. And there were things that the law required that the Congress required all through water, soil, geology, trees, animals, everything. And I obviously had water and we couldn't drive or use any mechanical machines in a wilderness, you couldn't fly in. So, everything was done on either horseback or backpacking. And I did a lot of... Over that three-or-so-year period, I had a lot of ten-day-on, four-day-off histories where I would go into the wilderness by myself and be alone in the wilderness for nine to ten days, for I don't know how many times. And I came to really like that.

0:34:40.9 James Wall: Yeah.

0:34:42.7 Bob Delk: And I'm still mentally at a position where I'm happier with fewer people. I mean, I don't hate people, [chuckle] but I'm just not big at crowds. So...

0:35:00.6 James Wall: Yeah. There's a peace in nature.

0:35:02.1 Bob Delk: Yeah.

0:35:02.3 James Wall: It's always what the transcendentalist used to write about that if you want to ... It rehabilitates your mind in a way to be out there. And now people pay to do what you were getting paid to do.

0:35:18.4 Bob Delk: Exactly. Exactly. I looked at...

0:35:20.2 James Wall: Remarkable.

0:35:20.7 Bob Delk: Some of that stuff and I did some rafting on some of that. I was never good on the raft, but we had a guy there that was and so we did some rafting on the North Fork of the Flathead and some other things. And you're right, here I am on a three day rafting trip, and I'm getting paid "x" dollars plus an extra whatever it was in those days, six, eight, dollars a day per diem. [laughter] So I thought, "This is okay, I can do this."

0:35:56.4 James Wall: Good way to make a buck.

0:35:57.5 Bob Delk: It was, it was. And that might be my warmest time. There was very little... I didn't have any battles with anybody, there was no tension. There was no district ranger or somebody else that says, "you should be doing this or you shouldn't be doing it that way." It just, I'd get up on that morning I left and go away and come back ten days later. And sometimes people even say, "Oh, hi, you're back?" "Yes I am, thank you". [laughter]

0:36:33.0 James Wall: Wow. That's a good way to earn a buck. Yeah. Well, the last question I always ask, and you've already maybe already answered this, but looking back at, what does the Forest Service mean to you and that's... It doesn't have to be a... It could be a good or a bad memory it's, or a conflicted one but when you feel towards the Forest Service what is the feeling, the emotion that you feel towards it?

0:36:56.3 Bob Delk: Oh, it's good. There's nothing bad about it at all. The problem in Washington that I brought up about the way this guy operated, that's my problem really. Not the Forest Service problem, not his problem, it's my problem. I couldn't... I didn't want to deal with it. And so I didn't. But no, I don't... I have good feelings. This has been fun, this, the last couple days. Because these... They go back to my era. You know, we're talking here of the '70s and '60s and that's that whole group that's where they're from. And I knew a lot of them, some of them I didn't, and then what's happening and I... At first, I thought it was me but many of them said, "No, it's the same". And that is, "I recognize that name but I don't recognize you. [chuckle] You've changed". "Yes, we have [chuckle] It's been a few years". So, no, this was a very good visit for me with my old Forest Service friends, I have thoroughly enjoyed it.

0:38:16.0 James Wall: Yeah. Well, it's such a select group of... Only this group of people... A very, very, very small group of people in the world can empathize with that portion of your life. And so, you can see that and it's interesting to see how things change over time. But yeah, that era will never be that way again, and there's only so many people that can testify to it. It's good that you were able to make it in here, I'm glad that we got to do this.

0:38:44.6 Bob Delk: Well...

0:38:44.9 James Wall: But thanks for sharing your stories with me. I feel like I learned a lot.

0:38:50.8 Bob Delk: Okay. Good talking with you.

0:38:53.1 James Wall: Great.