

An Interview with Al Todd

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**0:00:06.3 James Wall:** So, you start out in Camden, New Jersey, you take a circuitous route through the restaurant industry in Arizona, and then all of a sudden, you're in the middle of the Clearwater National Forest. Is that a moment where you're like, "What am I doing? How did I get here?"

**0:00:25.9 Al Todd:** Well, yes, but it was really a moment of saying, kind of, "How did I get here," like, "How am I so lucky to be able to do this?" Because it was so, so different than anything I had experienced in my life before that. So, yeah, I thought it was, and the responsibilities I had were not overwhelming. So my job was to collect information and data and do stream surveys, and I had the instructions on what I was supposed to be doing. But I was learning so much, learning how to navigate by map and altimeter and compass and that sort of thing. It was just really a fascinating experience.

**0:01:08.1 James Wall:** So at this point, you're invested, this is going to be the gig.

**0:01:11.6 Al Todd:** Yeah, I'm kind of hooked now, yeah, right.

**0:01:14.7 James Wall:** And so you're telling the story of a few different first jobs. That's your first, first job, but then after that you ended up in Tahoe, right?

**0:01:22.8 Al Todd:** On the Tahoe National Forest, yeah.

**0:01:23.3 James Wall:** The Sierraville District.

**0:01:23.4 Al Todd:** Yep.

**0:01:26.2 James Wall:** Tell me about that, because that seems to be a place where people love ending up.

**0:01:31.8 Al Todd:** Oh, really? Okay.

**0:01:33.6 James Wall:** Has a beautiful, in terms of water, a lot of different things to do there.

**0:01:37.7 Al Todd:** It was a beautiful area, especially with the Sierra Valley and the east side of the Sierra Mountains. And, but, that was a job, that was a real job where you're now, "I'm here, I have responsibilities, show up on the district." Nobody really knows what I'm supposed to be doing. It's like the, except for my boss who was on the other side of the forest, because I was hired to be the east side guy. He was working the west side. But it was a while before Mike Zan and I had a chance to kind of touch base. So I was kind of on my own and trying to figure out, "What exactly am I here supposed to do?" My district ranger was like, "Well," like you were saying before, "We had to hire one of these, so somebody... "

**0:02:26.4 James Wall:** So here you are. [laughter]

**0:02:27.2 Al Todd:** Here you are. Here's the... Yeah, it's like.

**0:02:32.3 James Wall:** Here's a map.

**0:02:32.3 Al Todd:** I was surprised when I wrote it down and said... My boss gave me keys to a truck and just said, "Go get familiar with the district." That was his instructions when I got there. I thought that was a really... It was cool, but it was a really unusual thing for somebody to do, until I talked to a lot of other hydrologists and found out that was the experience they had as well. These...

**0:02:54.7 James Wall:** Yeah, really common.

**0:02:58.2 Al Todd:** Folks showing up and just nobody really knew what to do with them. Said, "Just go out there and get familiar with things." But I had come a long way from this kid from the city and then doing all my work in the desert Southwest. And then all of a sudden I'm in the High Sierras and I'm supposed to be being the expert on what people could do out there and not damage the water, so it was... [chuckle]

**0:03:21.4 James Wall:** I'm assuming that this district ranger did not play a mentoring role in your life, but the, Mike Zan.

**0:03:26.3 Al Todd:** Mike Zan did, yeah, he...

**0:03:27.0 James Wall:** Zan, the forest hydrologist, you mentioned as the first person to kind of take you aside and show you where the bodies are buried, so to speak.

**0:03:36.1 Al Todd:** Yeah, he was the one that started saying, "Okay, this is how we do it. This is how we do business kind of like, and this is what people are going to want from you and this is what writing a report on a timber sale is kind of going to look like. But you're really, you're the eyes and ears out there, so you're going to have to figure this out on your own." But Mike was a good guide, for sure. And John Rector, who I know you've interviewed, John was the regional person at that point in time, was always a great source of advice and mentoring as well.

**0:04:10.4 James Wall:** Yeah. Did you interview with him when you hired or did you just find out that he had hired you?

**0:04:17.4 Al Todd:** That was a time...I actually didn't interview with anyone. That was a time in the...

**0:04:25.2 James Wall:** What a time to be alive. [laughter]

**0:04:25.5 Al Todd:** Federal service when you filled out an application, submitted it and you got a letter saying, "We're offering you this position." So I actually never interviewed with a soul. Didn't really even know where I was going, necessarily, but when I got the offer, I just said, "Yeah, absolutely. I'm going to do this, I'm going to go." There was a time period in there where there was very few, I think, people coming out of school to fill these positions that were being considered legally necessary. And so the government agencies were snatching people up. But it was probably the fact that I had had that opportunity to work on the Clearwater as a seasonal, as a temporary, that got me an offer from the Forest Service because I'm sure they saw that, were able to talk to my boss up there and find out whether I was worth taking on, so to speak.

**0:05:24.6 James Wall:** So you said that you didn't know what a timber sale was when you arrived on the Tahoe.

**0:05:30.4 Al Todd:** Not really.

**0:05:31.6 James Wall:** You must have found out quick, I would imagine, seeing as most district rangers in this era, that's pretty much what they wanted to do.

**0:05:42.8 Al Todd:** Oh, yeah, there was a lot of pressure.

**0:05:44.1 James Wall:** And for a lot of hydrologists, they were seen as the roadblock to doing what they wanted to do.

**0:05:47.8 Al Todd:** Yep. Yeah, absolutely.

**0:05:48.4 James Wall:** How much did getting out the cut play a role in your time on the National Forests? Was it...

**0:05:57.4 Al Todd:** Oh, it was huge, yeah.

**0:06:00.1 James Wall:** Did you feel the pressure from district rangers or were they at least giving you some deference to do your due diligence?

**0:06:07.0 Al Todd:** I'd say there was a little bit of both. Obviously, there was... You knew the pressure they were under to get the cut out and we were looking at harvesting from almost every part of the forest. I would go into a year, like maybe the second year I was there, I probably had like 14 timber sales to evaluate and write reports on. So it was pretty much most of what you did. And some you were able to say, "Okay, we can do this, use these BMPs [Best Management Practices], whatever, locate roads in these locations and you'll be fine." And then there were others where you had to fight a battle to say, "This is actually a very bad idea. This is not the place we should be harvesting timber." I can remember a couple of them, one where they wanted to remove all the large riparian trees along this and they put a road right at the edge of the creek where there was seeps all the way along there. And it was like, "This road, this is just going to be an absolute nightmare."

**0:07:17.9 Al Todd:** So that was one. That was probably the first one that I fought, wrote the report kind of more or less saying, "This is a disaster in the making," and had to go sit in front of the district ranger and the silviculturist and whatever and say, explain it to them again. But we did, they actually amended that one and left all those units out. And so you started to feel like you could. You could, with the right argument and good information and a willingness to kind of like work with them to find ways that they could meet their objectives, and at the same time, keep them out of trouble. But it was a lot of pressure on rangers to harvest every area they could.

**0:08:08.9 James Wall:** Yeah. You know, the weird thing to me is that there's, the only—and correct me if I'm wrong—it seems like a hydrologist on a National Forest, if they have a big issue with something or if their data shows that, "Hey, you can't build a road here, it's a stupid thing to do, it's going to mess up the whole ecosystem, so to speak," there's no lever to pull that's going to stop a district ranger who doesn't care about you from doing whatever the hell he wants.

**0:08:39.2 Al Todd:** No.

**0:08:40.5 James Wall:** Except for you to then end run him, go up the flagpole in different family trees of the Forest Service and try to get pressure from the top down, which just seems like a really tough way to do business.

**0:08:54.1 Al Todd:** It is a tough way to do business.

**0:08:54.9 James Wall:** But it sounds like, at least there was a, came a point where you had a little bit more credence.

**0:09:02.9 Al Todd:** Yeah, I thought it was a good learning experience and probably went on to help me deal with things that I faced later in my career. It was not all about just fighting what folks maybe wanted to do. It was also about finding a way to kind of work with the engineers on road locations to say, "Okay, that's like, let's figure out the best way to do this. Let's figure out the right route. Let's, if we have to, let's use special road building practices to kind of get where we're going without damage." The same thing with the timber folks is, there were some times when you just really had to say, "This is just a really bad idea." [chuckle] And there were other times you would say, "Okay, well, let's work together and find out where the best places to do this are, where we can feel good about doing it without any problems."

**0:09:58.6 James Wall:** I think one of the most revelatory remarks of your narrative is that you're not a hydrologist, you're a watershed politician.

**0:10:05.5 Al Todd:** Oh yeah. Well, yeah.

**0:10:07.9 James Wall:** Which takes us to...

**0:10:10.1 Al Todd:** See, my life really changed, yeah.

**0:10:10.1 James Wall:** Because we've got ten minutes, but what a transition here. You went from the Forest Service to State and Private Forestry, and then like a good sort of circle, you came back to the Chesapeake, to your beloved home, Chesapeake area, to do this job.

**0:10:25.3 Al Todd:** That was...

**0:10:25.3 James Wall:** And you're the only 1315 in NA, in the Northeastern Area.

**0:10:33.9 Al Todd:** The change to State and Private Forestry was, and I think it is, to me, it's probably the most meaningful part of my whole career and I think it's a shame that more folks in my field don't get the chance to do it. Ninety-nine percent of the people who work in the Forest Service don't know that State and Private Forestry even exists as a branch of the Forest Service.

**0:10:58.0 James Wall:** Now, did you have to leave the Forest Service, or did they do a MOU?

**0:11:01.5 Al Todd:** No, it's part of the Forest Service. It's one of our branches. We have a National Forest System, State and Private Forestry, Research, and International Forestry, it's actually four branches. But most people don't even know that State and Private is actually part of the Forest Service. So I didn't know what I was getting into either. But when I got recruited to come east to work for S&PF [State and Private Forestry] in the Northeastern area, it was to work as a

Chesapeake Bay liaison. So that was the full circle. When I saw that job posted, I said, "Oh, I have to apply for this, this is kind of, this is bringing me full circle." But the work in State and Private Forestry, I got to do work that helped to advance the same things I was trying to do with the National Forest System, but to advance those same principles of watershed protection, watershed restoration, water quality enhancement, water supply protection, all those things on private lands. And private lands are the majority of forest lands in the country, are privately owned.

**0:12:13.9 Al Todd:** And so, and in addition to that, after the time I spent in Lake Tahoe as well, this was an opportunity to really work on collaboration. So it was like nothing we could do, because in State and Private, and then the Forest Service, as a Forest Service person, we don't really have any authority. What we're really trying to do is convince state forestry agencies and private landowners to essentially make decisions and implement programs and take actions that are aimed at protecting watersheds, restoring streams, and that sort of thing, which is not their first priority necessarily, so it was a lot of salesmanship. I kind of made that comment in there that it was actually Dr. Lloyd Swift who told me that one time. We were on a panel together sharing our career experiences, and he did his whole thing on roads and water quality in terms of research. And I talked about developing riparian buffer programs and urban forest canopy enhancement work in cities and all the reasons we were doing that and how we did it through legislative initiatives and goal setting and all these kinds of things with state agencies and nonprofits to convince people that what we were telling them they ought to either do or sacrifice something to actually invest in.

**0:13:49.0 Al Todd:** And Lloyd said, "You know, you're not a hydrologist anymore, you're a watershed politician." [laughter] I said, "You know, I think that's actually a lot of what I do, is try to sell watershed to people who aren't all that familiar with it."

**0:14:04.1 James Wall:** Yeah, you're always, I think, selling, even within the Forest Service, it's just you might be selling to other people in the Forest Service, ideas and projects and stuff.

**0:14:15.4 Al Todd:** Ideas, and yes, exactly.

**0:14:16.5 James Wall:** But eventually you're going to have to deal with the public, especially after NEPA [National Environmental Policy Act] and the Clean Water Act. You're going to have to get input from the public. It's not the old days.

**0:14:25.7 Al Todd:** Yeah it is all about trying to find people to share the vision you have for what needs to be done. Yeah, that was true on the National Forests and it was really true working to make change on private lands.

**0:14:39.3 James Wall:** Okay, so we've got five minutes. Let's do some last minute questions. I always try to ask the same questions at the very end. First is, what's the one thing you miss the most about the job?

**0:14:53.1 Al Todd:** The people I worked with, no doubt about it. That was the beauty of, and it's hard to explain to people that I think are not really, have never worked for the Forest Service, is that no matter what problems or issues or whatever you were dealing with, there was this kind of camaraderie and family-like thing that linked you together. And it was really great to be a part of, and so I miss that. And just the sense of sharing so many things with people that have been through the same sorts of things that you've been through.

**0:15:39.7 James Wall:** Got you.

**0:15:40.3 Al Todd:** It's a great family.

**0:15:40.4 James Wall:** If you could go back in time and give yourself a piece of advice when you were first starting out in the outfit on the Forest Service, knowing what you know now, about how to survive this business and how to thrive in this business, what would that be? What do you know now that you wish you'd have known then?

**0:16:00.1 Al Todd:** That's a great question, that really is. I would say take the time to listen, take the time to observe. I think like many people, I kind of wanted to get things done. And sometimes you kind of don't take the time to really enjoy what's going on around you and to kind of be fully present in the work you're doing. You're kind of always moving on to the next thing. So if I could say, I'd say, "Slow down, enjoy this a little bit while along the ride, and take time to kind of appreciate what's around you."

**0:16:44.4 James Wall:** Good answer. Was there a favorite time in your career? Now this doesn't have to be the time in which you felt like you accomplished the most, but the time in your career where you felt like you were having the most fun?

**0:17:00.1 Al Todd:** Oh, I think that was probably clearly when I was on the Lake Tahoe Basin. I was brought there to develop the Watershed Restoration Program. There's something about doing restoration, like restoring damaged environments that's just so rewarding to do it. And I had a crew of people, I had a staff of people that were really fun to work with. And going out and designing projects and then going out with the crew and kind of getting the work done was really, really fun.

**0:17:33.2 James Wall:** Wow. Alright, last question is always, what does the Forest Service mean to you? Now that you look back on it and you've got it in the rear view mirror as an entity in your life and in society, what does it mean to you?

**0:17:44.3 Al Todd:** Well, I can clearly say the Forest Service really made me who I am. It gave me the qualities of character that I value in myself at this point in time. It's a lived experience, I think, working for an agency like the Forest Service. And it shaped everything about who I am. When I look back, I have nothing but really fond memories and all the opportunities the Forest Service gave me, I never stopped appreciating. It let me travel to amazing places, let me learn all kinds of new things. And just, I don't know, I always felt like it was just a great cause to be a part of when you look back on it.

**0:18:37.3 James Wall:** Well, it sounds like you had a really good run.

**0:18:40.1 Al Todd:** Absolutely.

**0:18:44.0 James Wall:** Thanks for sharing your memories with us today.

**0:18:44.0 Al Todd:** Yeah, my pleasure.