

ORAL HISTORY  
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00:00:19:19 Q: Today is November 30th of the year 2000, I'm Larry Quinn with the Office of Communications at the U.S. Department of Agriculture in Washington and today we're talking with Mike Dombek who is the Chief of the Forest Service, in fact you were the 14th Chief named January 6th, 1997 I believe.

00:00:38:07 But you've had a life long background in natural resource areas before coming to this position. Would you tell us a little bit about your background before USDA?

00:00:46:08 A: Well I'd be happy to Larry, in fact I think I'm probably the Chief to have grown up on a national forest. I grew up 25 miles from a town of 1500 in northwestern Wisconsin on the Chiwanagan (ph.) National Forest. In fact the house we lived in was within about a half mile of the West Fork lookout tower which is one of the old lookouts on the national forest.

00:01:14:15 And as a kid, 8, 9, 10, 12 years old I used to go up and in fact walk up with the forestry technician there

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who was George Bakeman (ph.) at the time and of course knew a lot about the national forest and that landscape and one of the things that I think I believe I learned almost as much from is all the formal education was the 11 years I spent as a fishing guide.

00:01:39:08 And it's kind of interesting you know, you grew up in that country at that time and there were sort of two things you could do. You either worked in the woods and in that part of the country at that time it was cutting and peeling aspen which locally was known as popal (ph.) not aspen.

00:01:52:25 And did that for a couple of summers and after being in the woods with the wood ticks with mosquitoes and black flies, the humidity in June and July, then you had those big, beautiful lakes. And of course the fishing camps and resorts. And then I got started guiding in 1963 as a high school kid, mostly muskee (ph.) fishing, but wild life fishing and other kinds of things, a few other trips.

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00:02:16:22 And really did that through high school and college, the years that I taught, really until I started working for the Forest Service in 1978 on the Munisene (ph.) District and the Hiawatha in Michigan. The other thing that was neat about building is the fact that you got to interact with so many different people.

00:02:36:16 You know people from all walks of life in a very relaxed atmosphere. You know doctors, lawyers, farmers, business people and got to really see how much nature and the forest and the wild land was worth to people and what it really meant. I mean this is where they came to decompress from high pressure jobs.

00:02:58:24 And it was interesting, I can remember the old timers where I grew up mentioning to me that even in the Depression, that the businesses and the fishing camps are really didn't suffer a lot of hardship because people still came and recreated. There was still a body of people that could afford do that.

00:03:14:08 To get on a train in Chicago or Indianapolis and come

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up to the north woods to hunt and fish. And it was really the combination of the interaction with the people and nature that was important in my upbringing.

The other thing is it exposed me to a whole new dimension that rural you know kids from a poor rural community aren't exposed to.

00:03:38:09

You know people from different walks of life and I got to tell you in my last year of guilding was 1977 and I still get cards from people that I you know became friendly with as a fishing guide. The other thing that I did in those years was I spent a lot of time in nature study as a biology major in college in education.

00:04:03:08

I've written a column now for 26 years called "Natural History Notes" that sort of is, talks about unique features of various plants and animals, both common and rare from that part of the country. And by the time I got out of college, I probably knew the scientific name of virtually every plant and animal in the area.

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00:04:22:01 And it was that whole combination you know, the love of the outdoors, the hunting, the fishing, the hiking, the outdoor activities that really I think built a foundation for me that I was able to you know take throughout life that I so much appreciate the out of doors and the open space and how important it is to people and as a result how important it is that we be good stewards of the land.

00:04:49:26 And since my time doing research in the lake country and as a forest service employee, first on the Munasene District of the Hiawatha, I was really the first fisheries biologist they hired, then focusing on some of the lake and muskee research that I did. You know the muskee is the state fish of the state of Wisconsin and it's one of these, it's like the steelhead, it's a prized species.

00:05:13:10 We did a fair amount of research for the forest service on the muskees, in fact the forest service essentially paid for my Ph.D. I was a half time employee as a student doing a project that the forest service was

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very much interested in and then came back as a full-time employee to the forest service and then went on from the Midwest to the Pacific Southwest region in California where I managed the entire aquatics program.

00:05:45:06 And then in Washington as a fisheries program manager.

And one of the interesting things in that job was we really developed the first market based program in the forest service. It was called Rise to the Future and the rising to the future was basically... it was the theme and the logo was a steelhead rising for a fly.

00:06:10:29 But it signified I think the importance of aquatic programs to the agency and the fact that 50 percent of the blue ribbon trout streams in the United States are on national forests and it continued to build off of that using that market-based approach where we targeted a specific audience, we understood what their needs were.

00:06:32:07 And there was in that era that the fisheries program grew from within a couple of years from about \$8.

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million program annually to over \$40 million annually and you know today it's much, much larger than that because of the importance of the broader array of resources.

00:06:51:05 Just a couple of other things I might highlight. The chief in 1989 asked me if I would, was interested in going over and helping deal him out for a time. And I think I sort of wondered, was skeptical at first, what I have done you know that the chief is asking me go and help the direct of BLM.

00:07:10:08 But basically in the Burford (ph.) era, in the Watted era over at Interior, they basically dismantled a lot of the you know resource programs. And then when the Bush administration came in, they wanted someone that was a career employee to come and rebuild the fish, wildlife, recreation and range programs and I spent four years doing that, also building a science program.

00:07:36:15 And as the first science advisor to the director of BLM. Administrations changed, I was asked to be Acting

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Assistant Secretary for Lands and Minerals when Bruce Babbit came in as Secretary and then worked with Assistant Secretary Bob Armstrong who was confirmed in May after the Clinton administration came in.

00:07:54:29 And Bob was just a wonderful man, one of the most wonderful people I think I've ever worked for. I worked as his Deputy and then Chief of Staff and then when Jim Backoff (ph.) left BLM, they asked me to go down as a Acting Director where I spent for three years before I came over as Chief.

00:08:13:23 And of course then and that time really interacted a lot with the folks here at the Department of Agriculture with Jack Ward Thomas who was then Chief, we focused on grazing issues and a lot of tough issues that the Secretary of Interior, Bruce Babbit was working on.

00:08:30:05 And then subsequently when Jack decided to retire, Secretary Glickman asked me to come up and take this job.

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00:08:37:05 Q: Hearing your background it almost seems like a dream come true that you're in this position, yet from the day you arrived, or even a few days before you arrived, you've had a very big challenge when you came.

00:08:51:12 A: Well you know there's no question about the fact that the forest service is probably one of the most difficult agencies to manage, I think for a variety of reasons. And the agency had been going through rocky times since probably the mid to late '80s with the key point being there being the spotted owl issue.

00:09:15:09 And that was the time basically where gradually the court systems, began, became more and more and more involved in natural resource decisions. And we became more reactive in the real, that culminated with a Judge Dwyer decision basically to halt the timber operations in the Pacific Northwest.

00:09:37:21 We were at a five billion board foot cut, there were attempts to compromise with industry at three million,

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at two million, they would have no part of it. The decision, the Dwyer Decision came down and basically shut down the program and that was a very traumatic times internally for the forest service to deal with the uncertainty, the courts moving in.

00:10:06:29 And Jack Ward Thomas coming in as chief with the beginning to focus on eco-system management and Jack's efforts really to inculcate eco-system management. And then the Congress changed in 1994 and that changed the whole dynamic and we again got into a more combative atmosphere with the tendency of the Congress in '94 to be investigatory, less collegial.

00:10:35:06 For the first time they started swearing in agency heads at hearings and a lot of, lots of not so pleasant hearings. And if you look at the whole era of the '90s, not a whole lot was done by Congress. Congress was almost impudent with regard to giving issues through Congress and approved by the President.

00:10:57:06 And that really I think opened the door for us to do a

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lot of things administratively with then in the last few years we've been able to do. But I just want to talk a little bit about the negotiation for me to come over as chief, really it was about a six month period and something that's not on the record, but at least is important to me is.

00:11:20:29 I was asked to come over here in June of '96 and thought and told the secretary and the chief of staff that I didn't think that was a good idea. That we needed to convince Jack Ward Thomas to stay on through the end of the first Clinton term which Jack then ultimately did and then I was formally offered the job on December 20th.

00:11:46:21 And my first day at work back at the forest service, sort of coming back home again was January 6th of 1997. But an interesting, the reason I mention that date is, on January 3rd Jack Anderson, the syndicated columnist ran a column that appeared all over the country that basically said that you know the Vice President had finally found an agency even he couldn't he re-invent.

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00:12:11:20 And they talked about the entrenchment and the intractability of the forest service to move, to adapt and I said to myself, gosh why I am even agreeing to go over there with that kind of environment. And the relationships between the administration and the Congress were very, very strained within the agency.

00:12:34:14 I think the agency felt that it was unappreciated, that they felt unloved, unappreciated and like they had no friends. And to move into that climate, Jack Thomas left the job not feeling very good about the environment, both in the administration as well as in the Congress.

00:12:59:20 We had just come off of the salvage rider battle which is another story in itself that was a real disaster from, with regard to resource management all around. And the talk was then that the agency had a muddled mission, that the forest services old can do attitude had diminished and it was an agency that was good at getting from A to B as Jack Ward Thomas used to say,

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when it knew where B was.

00:13:24:23 And I got to tell you, I for one never really believed that the forest service had a muddled mission, but the fact is there was all this disagreement about natural resource management, about whether to cut trees or not to cut trees. You know everybody loves trees, some like them horizontal and some like them vertical.

00:13:40:10 But everybody loves trees and we set out after a first year of fairly tenacious hearings in addition to the natural resource fights that were going on. The forest service was one of two entities in government that couldn't get a clean financial audit. Our systems were outdated, we were drowning in complexity.

00:14:02:13 And just to give you an idea of the complexity of the business side of the program, we were doing, we were essentially I'd say at that time, maybe a 35,000 employee organization with about a \$3 billion budget. We were doing up to 100 million financial transactions a month.

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00:14:20:20 We had 40 systems that weren't connected, 800 data entry points and in some cases unqualified or untrained employees entering data into the system and so the numbers didn't match. And when Congress would say the forest service how many airplanes it had, where are your airplanes, we didn't really know.

00:14:39:03 And not because they were lost, it's because the accounting systems and the CPA certifiable methods of tracking data you know, with modern data systems, just simply were not in place and it was a result of the decentralized culture in the organization.

00:14:57:27 I believe I've had more hearings on financial management on accountability than all the other chiefs put together. In fact I think I'm the only chief perhaps maybe even the only agency that appeared at a joint hearing in front of three committee chairs on the topic of financial management and accountability.

00:15:13:23 The House Resources Committee chaired by Don Young, the

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Appropriations Committee with subcommittee chair Ralph Regula (ph.) and the Budget or Finance Committee chaired by John Kasitch (ph.) and it was basically taking the forest service to the woodshed for not having its financial house in order.

00:15:36:27 And at that time you know we developed, quickly developed a strategy. I brought in a Harvard trained MBA, a former private sector CEO, by the name of Frances Pandolphy (ph.) who was just newly retired CEO and President of Times and Mirror Magazines, formerly Vice President of CBS.

00:15:57:16 Prior to that time had run his own company and then sold it and we began to craft a strategy for the administrative, for the business accountability side of the program. Established a private sector model with the first ever chief operating office, the first ever chief financial officer, we began to re-assemble the business side of the organization.

00:16:22:21 And I'm proud to say that next year we're going to have

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a clean financial audit. We've got our first ever real property inventory which in an organization the size of the forest service, believe me is really a task. And now employees are saying to me, chief, you know what about natural resource management, why do we have to do these inventories and why do we have to do all of this stuff?

00:16:45:29 And my response to them is that would you buy stock in a company that didn't know what its assets were, yet you expect me to go up to the Hill and come back with three or four, a three or four billion dollar appropriation each year and we better have the same credibility as a private sector organization.

00:17:07:26 And we've put a lot of energy into the business side of the program of the forest service and are making good progress. Let me now go back to the muddled mission and some of our reaction and the strategy to deal with not only the criticism from Congress, the concern of employees and the perceptions that people like Jack Anderson that said you know the agency couldn't do

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independent.

00:17:34:27 My belief was that we didn't have a muddled mission but the fact is very factions and interest groups were righting within the mission. Because one of the luxuries we have in a democracy is we have choices and then we have differences. The other form of government is called a dictatorship, we don't have these fights, we don't have these disagreements.

00:17:59:19 And I continue to say to employees, it's okay to disagree, it's okay to be part of this debate that sometimes is somewhat lancorious (ph.) and we just need to roll up our sleeves and wade right into it and use our best judgment, our years of professional experience and a solid science foundation to lay out recommendations.

00:18:20:08 So we set out with three management team meetings and crafted what came to be known as the natural resources agenda. And there wasn't anything that was new, it was a refocusing on what the mission of the forest service

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historically was. And I refer to it, in fact the title of the first speech on that I gave I called "Returning to Our Roots".

00:18:41:05 Because the 1897 Organic Act basically says something like this, that no forest reserves shall be established except to protect the forest within the boundary, secure favorable conditions of water flows, and provide sustainable supply of timber for the American people.

00:18:57:21 So then the natural resources agenda and craft that into say 1990s lingo was basically the focus on sustainable forests and grand slam eco-system management. To focus on recreation, the fastest growing program in the forest service, in fact few people know that there's more outdoor recreation on the national forests than there are on the national parks.

00:19:26:14 Forty percent of the outdoor recreation that occurs on public lands in the United States occurs on national forests. So we needed to focus on recreation and develop a modern up-to-date business like approach with

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that tremendously fast growing program that was under funded.

00:19:45:21 We focused roads and roadless another very, very contentious issue which I'll talk about more a little later. And we focused on watershed health and restoration. And I kept on asking employees and myself the questions, you know who's going to want us in 20 years, who's going to want us in 50 years and why?

00:20:06:16 We're in this milieu of the cut and no cut debate and yet the multiple use mission and the vastness of what the forest service manages is just absolutely tremendous and if I say what, well one of the big issues environmental conservation issues of this century is going to be water.

00:20:29:10 And the water was part of that Organic Act securing favorable conditions for water flows. And the cleanest water in the United States is flowing off our forested landscapes and we need to make that connection, help people make that connection and help the public and our

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own employees appreciate where that is.

00:20:48:13 And I sort of refer to it now as connecting the forest to the faucet. Not many peop..., some people care deeply about the timber debate, but a lot of people do not. Eighty percent of the United States live in cities and towns and urban areas, we're an organization that's worried about my support base.

00:21:07:16 And yet that support base was dwindling in the old model of the conservation debate and we have to somehow branch out and connect with more people. And I felt that water was the way to do that because if not many people can do away with water with for many days and survive.

00:21:28:25 And the Watershed Health and Restoration in Waters sort of became the mantra that I followed and developed a series of presentations sort of referring to the forest service as the world's largest water company because eight percent of the surface (unint.) of the US lower 48 I believe is national forest, with 14 percent of the

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runoff comes out of these national forest.

00:21:55:24 Forty, rather 80 percent of the rivers and streams in the United States originate on national forests. Even in the East where we have smaller national forests, a lesser proportion of the landscape where we have rivers like the Potomac. You know in my home state of Wisconsin you've got rivers like the Chippewa, the Wisconsin, the Flamboya (ph.) they originate on national forests.

00:22:17:01 So do many of their tributaries and then you go out West with the national forests and the higher elevations and the Rockies, the Cascade Ranges, it's incredibly important. Did a preliminary economic analysis of water and 3.7 billion dollars per year in marginal economic value and that's not figuring \$1.29 a pint like this is probably worth, that's figuring about \$6 to \$8 an acre foot of water.

00:22:46:29 And talked a lot about water and watersheds and I'm really pleased with I think the benefits of that. Now

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management is moving toward a large scale watershed restoration where we're looking at all of these kinds of things. I'd, I assume this is the kind of thing you want.

00:23:10:18 Q: Absolutely, I think that you've given us a good view of your refocusing the agenda. But there's a large area of crisis management that every year you become involved in and this past year the year 2000 probably the most disastrous fire situation anyone has ever faced in the history of this country, especially trying to manage it, like you're in a position of doing.

00:23:35:22 What was your thinking going through this crisis, how did you approach it and how did you lead the staff out of it?

00:23:46:29 A: Well I wish I could take credit for that, but the organization deserves the credit for, the forest service is exceptional in dealing with emergencies. And the fire community and our fire fighting machine is probably one of the best in the world if not the best

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in the world.

00:24:03:00 The incident command system and we have been you know honing that system for a long time and had a real wake up call, we had the Yellowstone fires in 1988 and the intensity and magnitude of the fire seasons have gradually been increasing since about 1985.

00:24:25:22 In 1994 when I was Director of the Bureau of Land Management and Jack Ward Thomas was Chief, we probably had, I had some of the horrific experiences in my career, we had 34 firefighters die that year. It seemed like you know we were spending a good share of the season going to funerals and expressing our sympathy to families and it was very, very horrific a situation.

00:24:50:20 Did a lot of investigations, did a lot of retooling of the, not only the forest service but the whole national federal fire program. Two-thousand was the year that we really were put to the test with an exceptional, exceptionally dry year. We had our first fire this

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year, still 2000 on January 1.

00:25:15:07 And it seems then with the Sierra Grande fire the Park Service prescribed burn that escape, ultimately destroying almost 300 homes in the town of Los Alamos, it became known as the Sierra Grande fire, of human set fire, fire set by resource managers and from there on out the dry weather, it seemed like it just worse and worse and worse.

00:25:42:13 And the, this fire season was just full of teachable moments for us, and more importantly I think for the American public because I've never seen the press do a better job on any issue than they did on fire and helping to educate... helping educate the public that fire was a natural part of the landscape.

00:26:00:06 That it really was the policies of putting all fires out for almost a century, allowing the fuels to build up so then when you know mother nature finally took over with a real dry fuel year and in some cases several hundred lightening strikes in one mountain

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range in one night, maybe with three...

00:26:20:09 We'd wake up in the morning and we'd have 300 new starts and the fire season moved from the Southwest up the Rockies and really hit its peak in Idaho and Montana by late July and early August with us having as many as 60 project fires and a project fire is a fire over 1000 acres with escape wildfire and typically we're equipped to handle maybe a dozen very, very efficiently before we start deploying other resources like the military and other kinds of things.

00:26:53:19 And this year really put us to the test. We preach safety relentlessly. The number one priority was firefighter safety on the fire line, that no single tree structure is worth sacrificing a human life. Number two is we focused on the (unint.) interface, communities at risk because we didn't have resource to cover all of the fires we had to focus the resources.

00:27:20:25 And so we focused on where the human habitation was, where structures were at risk and private property.

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And then third we focused on initial attack, get 'em while they're small and I gotta say that the community of federal wild land firefighters put out over 79,000 acres this year in initial attack.

00:27:44:08 We burned, I should say not we but in the wild land fire, about 69...., 6.9 million acres this year which is well above average, but keep in mind that in the 1930s in the United States the average was about 30 million acres a year that burned. So we were making progress on you know our capability to suppress fire, that's part of the equation.

00:28:09:25 But also the other part of the equation is that we had an exceptionally dry year and a lot of fuel build up that we dealt with. It ended up that I think after having dealt with controversies like roadless and other kinds of things that I want to talk about in a little while, that the first service regained a lot of credibility this year because of the fire season.

00:28:36:09 Because what happened was we have been involved for a

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decade or more in these intractable debates about whether to cut timber or not timber, whether to road to not to road, whether to clear cut or not to clear cut, all of these sorts of things. And what the fire season did is it really demonstrated to local communities the value of the federal and forest service workforce.

00:28:59:03 We had one time this summer had 17,000 people, over half of our workforce, nationwide, fighting fires. We had 30,000 people including other agencies, state agencies on the fire line at one time. For example I participated in a program in Hamilton, Montana at the fairgrounds. I got a standing ovation.

00:29:23:09 Do you know the last time that a federal employee or a Chief of the Forest Service got a standing ovation maybe in any town in Montana? Or at least the local folks said they never remembered that and it wasn't because I was Mike Dombeck, it was because of what our firefighters had contributed to those local communities.

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00:29:40:19 And every place you went you saw signs, Thank You Forest Service, God Bless Our Firefighters and this is in some of the strongest anti-fed part of the country. And that, that was a tremendous coming together around a crisis like this, sort of like the Desert Storm era and it brought a tremendous amount of good will and ultimately good budget increases as we now move to rebuild our forces.

00:30:12:08 But we learned so much about wildfire and I got to tell you it's around fire that I've had the contact with some of the highest ranking officials in gov... For example in 1998 I flew with the Vice President on Air Force 2 to Velucia (ph.) County to the fires in Florida. This past year President Clinton, as I believe the first president ever to go to a fire camp.

00:30:38:15 And we set up a trip for the president, I proposed three different places for him to go, he selected Idaho to Burgdorf Junction to the fire there and I'm, along with John Pedesta flew with the President over the fire for about an hour and briefed him on the fire situation

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and he then made a presentation to the firefighters and just I think had a tremendous trip.

00:31:08:11 And really got to see first hand what we were dealing with and as the President said to the firefighters, he said, you know I just wanted to hop on Air Force One this morning and come out here and say thank you for what you're doing. And the thing that's amazing is that Bill Clinton would go to probably the most strongly anti-Clinton part of the United States and the people just loved him.

00:31:31:17 You know he has the almost arch-enemies with Larry Craig, came out, walked off of Air Force One together. Helen Chenowith (ph.) who was as you know had been tough to deal with at hearings was president... present, the governor was there, I mean it was a real coming together around the situation.

00:31:50:26 And it demonstrated to me you know the real skill that we have in President Clinton with somewhat that would just walk in to the lion's den and receive a standing

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ovation for caring the forest, the people there, the firefighters and so it was a tremendous year.

00:32:09:25 Q: Smokey Bear has been one of the most identifiable icons of almost anything in the last 50 to 75 years. And who took a little flak during this fire year, he was blamed because he was so successful in keeping people putting fires out that this may have contributed to that.

00:32:30:08 A: Well that's only in part true. The most important message that Smokey carries is be careful with fire because you know fire is always dangerous. But Smokey did symbolize the era when we suppressed all fires. You know the real turning point in wild land fire fighting was the year 1910.

00:32:57:11 Where basically that was the year because again a very, very difficult fire season that we declared all out war as a nation and a society on forest fires. And in 1935 the Forest Service formally passed a policy that all smokes should be out by 10:00 a.m. and in that time

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period we had developed again the most effective firefighting machine in the world.

00:33:19:06 Smokey came along, began to you know, evolved into this tremendous symbol that Ruddy Wonderland (ph.) so cleverly and skillfully and creatively developed over time. But by 1968 more people knew who Smokey was than who the president was. Smokey was only second to Santa Claus in recognition even for a time ahead of Mickey Mouse.

00:33:48:28 And now we're moving to era where we got a reverse... we got to do a lot of education and help people understand that fire is part of the natural eco-system, that these forests evolved with fire, that they had a regular fire regime and what we have done is we have come in and interrupted that by putting all fire out, allowing fuel to build up.

00:34:07:02 So rather than having a cool burn that would cleanse the forest, we ended up with almost a catastrophic burn because of the amount of fuel that would build up.

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Many, many, many more tons per acre that would be there in a natural situation and so the message of Smokey is still very, very important, be careful with fire.

00:34:28:13      What we've done is move away from the message of putting all fires out every time, everywhere that we recognize that there's a role for fire and I think the best way to describe it is that these forests evolved with fire, human habitation is what's new and it's our houses that are not fire adapted, the trees are.

00:34:47:21      And we learned a lot this year too, because we also helped the American public understand that the most, single most important thing they can do to protect their house, their barn to keep it from going up in flames is within two to five-hundred feet of that building, by practicing good fire-wise, fire safe management around their buildings.

00:35:09:20      So I've got to say you know we..., there's a silver lining in every cloud and this cloud is smoke that we had in this year 2000 was the fact that we learned so

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much about fire and with the press's coverage was almost as though it had been written fire ecologists or resource managers that we could...

00:35:32:12 People learned about fire this year and I think we will benefit tremendously from these lessons learned not unlike we did in 1998 the horrific, 1994 and then particularly the year 2000. My belief is that it'll be... go down as a milestone year just like 1910 was in that we begin to appreciate fire more than ever.

00:35:53:27 Q: Let's move to the roadless area. You just made a major policy announcement this month about that, you talked to your own staff about that and published it nationally. What led to that decision?

00:36:08:02 A: The roadless roads issue is an issue that's been plaguing the agency for a long, long time. We went... moved into the big timber era really associated with World War II where the forest service joined the war effort to provide the first, you know the timbers needed for military bases and then wood for the homes

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as soldiers returned home.

00:36:34:23 And we part of and ought to be proud of the fact that we were part of turning our culture into a culture of single-family homes. And that the timber cut increased, increased, increased began to be more controversial. We had controversies like the Monongahela Case was the first formal challenge of clear cutting that we lost that case.

00:36:59:04 The Bitterroot Case, problems with landslides on the Siluselaw (ph.) that were associated clear cutting and eroding. And by the time we reached '70s our Congress started going after, selected member of Congress... members of Congress started going after the forest service roads program.

00:37:17:24 A senator from my home state, Senator Proxmire was the one that would lead this fight every year. And by the time I became Chief in 1997 we had just a year of where we came within one vote in the House of Representatives of loosing 80 percent of the world's funding and here

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we have now a 380,000 mile road system that we have to maintain.

00:37:44:12 We have 7700 bridges that we have to maintain and be on a replacement schedule that's adequate. And in 1988 our roads budget was \$228 million by 1995 it had fallen to \$96 million. It was in the Senate we came within one vote of losing 25 percent of the program in the next year.

00:38:03:20 So what is it that you do, you know when you have a budget that's going down, down, down and I mean if you had plot this out, you know on a curve, at some point you're going to be at extinction with your roads funding. You've got to somehow turn the system around.

So what we tried to do is dissect well where is the controversy associated with roads?

00:38:26:13 Hunters, fishermen, people using the forest need the roads. Recreation is growing by leaps and bounds, they all use the roads. The road... the roads fight is really focused on entering the roadless areas. The

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large, last remaining unfragmented tracts of land that aren't officially designated as part of the National Wilderness Preservation system.

00:38:48:26 And we thought, well we need to somehow in the minds of people and in the minds of the Congress separate the roads and the roadless issue because they were after the roads program because they disagreed with us entering roadless areas.

00:39:05:07 And I got to tell you that we have about a 50 percent failure rate of projects proposed in roadless areas because of public opposition. Appeals, litigation if you're in an ar..., if you're a forest supervisor or a ranger in an area where you one of these controversial sales into a roadless area like say Deadwood on the Boise or Acolmallard (ph.) on the Nesperth (ph.) you know it takes all your law enforcement energy, your communications staff.

00:39:34:11 The whole staff is basically focused on this one issue, almost literally fighting for its life because those

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are all the resources they have. So the first thing we did was, did a moratorium on road building in a roadless areas.

00:39:48:05 And of all the things that I have done, that was sort of the biggest reaction. Congress was aghast that we would have the audacity to do something like that. The agency employees were surprised that we had the guts to do something like that.

00:40:02:26 And frankly at the time, you know we were sort of testing the water and the timber industry and others said to me, Mike, when I became Chief, they said, Mike you know we want to see more leadership out of the forest service. You're just being batted around in these debates, you're being too reactive.

00:40:20:03 And I said to them, I said well you might not like you know what you ask for. And the first reaction we had was that I got a letter from, signed by the committee chairers threatening us with a custodial budget that if we're not going to cut timber and we might as well put

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you back to where you were in 1940.

00:40:46:03 That got a lot of play in the press, Ted Stevens did not sign that letter, although Larry Craig, Helen Chinowitz (ph.), Frank Mercowski (ph.) and there was a fourth committee chair that signed that. That was you know they really put the gauntlet down.

00:41:00:12 But we didn't give up. And I can tell you for example, I had phone calls at home from people like the chairman of the Ag Committee, Bob Smith, that basically said, don't do this, put out a letter. And I said, what would a private landowner do if you had 380,000 miles roads and you were only receiving enough money to maintain 17 percent of it.

00:41:23:01 And your roads were literally crumbling behind you and we're getting hammered for landslides, for sedimentation and habitat degradation and endangered famine habitat and you know what is that you do? Would a private landowner go ahead and keep on building infrastructure when you couldn't maintain what you

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have?

00:41:40:00 And we developed I think some fairly easy to understand talking points and arguments that really, no one could really refute. Another area that I was criticized and I've been one that's been a champion of collaborative management, inclusive decision making. And they said chief, you're even talking collaborative management, working with local communities.

00:42:06:03 And all of a sudden womp, you know out comes this directive from Washington, this fiat as they call it. And I thought about that a lot as well and I would say, you know there's a role for the school board, there's a role for county commissioners, there's a role for the state house and there's a role for the federal government.

00:42:21:26 And when you have an \$8 billion in fact \$8.4 billion backlog in road maintenance, what do you do? There's not one governor, not one regional forester that has the resources to deal with that issue. It has to be

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dealt with at the national level, that's the purpose of the various levels of government in the United States.

00:42:50:16 It, the moratorium stuck. We were able to... there were attempts in Congress to stop it through riders and so on and it stuck and we began to test the waters further and so then our next move was to permanently ban road building in these roadless areas.

00:43:08:12 And the rationale was fairly straightforward. First of all it was controversial, we had a business, a private business invest money in areas that would have a high failure rate and when you have 280,000 miles of roads that are crumbling behind you, how to justify building more.

00:43:26:01 The rule making to prohibit road building in roadless areas attracted more attention than perhaps any other rule making certainly in USDA, perhaps even in government, 1.6 million comments. We held 600 public meetings, a meeting on every national forest plus in local communities.

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- 00:43:47:13      And I got to say that the purpose of the public meetings and the comment period is to learn more about the issue. It's not to-- it's not avoiding process of who's for and who's against, but resoundingly people wanted us to stay out of roadless areas. That's where the public is.
- 00:44:02:22      The hunters and the fishermen, 80 to 90% felt we have enough roads. Let's maintain these large, unfragmented tracts of land and then if you put it in the context of the entire nation, we're losing-- in the President's State of the Union a couple of years ago, he said, "We're losing 7,000 acres a day to development".
- 00:44:20:27      Seven thousand acres of farms, woodlands, wood lots and so on to development. The city of Atlanta has sprawled over 400,000 acres over the Atlanta metro area a forested landscape. Now, if we ask our self, "Who's gonna want us in 50 years and why", it's really these large, unfragmented tracts of land, you know.

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00:44:41:07 Yes, it's timber, but it's clean water. You know, it's solitude. It's fish and wild life habitat. It's the anchors for our rare and endangered and threatened species. It's the areas where-- that are more resistant to invasion of exotic species are increasingly important and my view was, "Well, if this issue would end up costing me my job, so be it".

00:45:06:02 But it was important that we protect these undeveloped landscapes. And the thing is we're not doing a thing to take away options for the future. I mean, if somebody 50 years from now decides well they wanna do something in these areas, they're still there.

00:45:20:28 Now there's a couple of other important points I want to make about the roadless issue and I also want to say that we got letters and strong support for doing this in congress, as well as the fairly electric opposition. I received a letter signed by 169 members of the House of Representatives saying not only stop road building in a roadless, stop logging.

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00:45:45:11 That letter was signed by 22 senators, including people like Senator Warner, a Republican like Strom Thurman that say not only stop road building, stop logging in roadless areas. So it really isn't at all a one-side issue. What you have is a very powerful group of interest that are trying to protect that interest and be able to enter in a roadless area.

00:46:05:20 And it's really not a timber fight because the fact is in the United States, the easy stuff is gone. And there's a reason these areas are roadless. Either the timber volumes are low for the most part -- now there are exceptions to that.

00:46:17:10 They're tough to get into, they're expensive to get into, they're in-- there's are all sorts of tough geology and road building in most of these areas is just, you know, not a smart thing to do. We went through the debate.

00:46:29:09 Lots of hearings, lots of rancorous hearings in Congress and put out our final environmental impact

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statement here a few weeks ago with our preferred alternative to not only protect the roadless area in the lower 48, but to apply to the Tongus (ph.) National Forest in 2004 after we have a period for the-- for economic adjustment to appear-- to occur in those communities.

00:46:54:04 And in that we're putting together a fairly solid economics package to assist those communities. And surprisingly enough there were a few failed attempts to deal with roadless, to stop our activities and our movement on roadless in Congress but they didn't stick.

00:47:15:19 And the President got involved in the issue. We put it on the President's plate, the President on October 13th of 1999 went to Reddish Knob on the Monongahela... George Washington rather National Forest in Virginia and basically directed the forest service to move forward.

00:47:32:06 So we had the clout of the President behind it and I think it was the first time for a long time that a

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President has really gotten involved. Now we've been able to get a president involved in issues like the Northwest Forest Plan early in the administration and so on, that a president took personal interest in these issues.

00:47:52:16 And if it weren't for that, it's unlikely that the chief alone or even the secretary alone would be able to move a tough issue like roadless forward. And my belief, it's going to stick at least a good portion of it's going to stick. Now I want to mention just a couple of other things quickly from the standpoint of presidential involvement.

00:48:15:21 The Sequoia National... giant Sequoia National Monument on the Sequoia National Forest, 380,000 acres, 38 of the 75 groves are sequoias are now a national monument managed by the national forest, a tremendous achievement. We've placed 459,000 acres off limits to mining on the Rocky Mountain front.

00:48:43:05 Almost the Serengeti of the West that we had some minor

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opposition but strong support. And these were considered very aggressive positions for the forest service to take. But I want to go back to the point that people made to me when I became Chief and they said we want to see some leadership.

00:49:02:12 And given the Congress wasn't able to come together and accomplish, build the majorities that they needed, it basically left the door open for the agencies like the forest service to move forward. And I think what we did is we moved from playing defense, we were dealing with the Chenoweth (ph.) Bill, the Craig Bill, the Smith Bill.

00:49:20:24 We were very busy but we were reactive. Now to putting policies on the table that Congress had to react to and really we're fairly successful in building coalitions and getting things done. And in this whole environment a lot of other things happened that I'm really proud of.

00:49:34:28 We have been working on our planning... revised

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planning regulations since 1988, those were finalized about 12 years later. And I when I first came into the job another thing that employees pleaded with me, they said Mike get the planning regs done and again I wish I could take credit for it myself, but you know with the help of Dan Glickman, Undersecretary Jim Lyons and a tremendous staff, they got the job done.

00:50:02:10

Now I want to go back to just a couple of other points and then wrap up. And that's that I talked about the threats of custodial management, the rancorous debate, the rough hearings with Congress and sometime I'd be up there two or three times a week, literally crawling back from Congress.

00:50:24:28

Here we had our biggest budget increase in history in the year 2000. We went from a \$3 billion to a \$4.4 billion budget. A lot of it revolved around the fire season but also programs like recreation, even energy and minerals international had significant budget increases.

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- 00:50:40:15 In addition to that our number of line items in the national forest system and construction decreased from 34 to 19 which symbolizes a greater trust in the agency's ability to manage and act. So from this climate of the threats of custodial management, our biggest budget increase in history, increased flexibility from Congress.
- 00:51:01:06 And to top it all off, the national forest service is about a quarter of a million acres bigger today than they were in 1997. We're quite, we're giving management a line between lakes, 170,000 acres from Tennessee Valley Authority, a major acquisition of the Bacqua (ph.) Ranch in New Mexico, that's one of the crown jewels of large unfragmented tracts of land.
- 00:51:24:01 So it's, you know... my belief is that we revitalized in a sense the Gifford-Pinchot bully pulpit that the agency always has... always had but it really wasn't using to the extent that it had. And I'm one that believes today that the country's hungry for leadership in these areas of conservation and they're tired of the

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endless debates and the lawsuits.

00:51:55:19 And that provides us with the operating environment to get some of these things done. The Rocky Mountain Front withdrawal, the Giant Sequoia National Monument, the planning regs, the roads policy, the roadless policies you know that will end up keeping 58 million acres of land in the United States free of roads.

00:52:17:12 And if man, if humans make a single lasting mark on the landscape, the most significant thing we can do to make a mark on the land is to build a road, far exceeding clear cutting, any level of timber harvest that one can do.

00:52:32:15 And my belief is that this is something that future generations are really going to say thank you for because of the water quality, because of the value of open space, the increasing recreation growth and all of the things that national forests are to people.

00:52:47:08 So I'm, as you can tell you know, not only excited

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about all of these accomplishments, I would really, we've really done a lot but we still have so far to go in culcating much of this within the agency and really focusing on the financial management accountability.

00:53:07:08 And there's a lot of pieces of things that remain to be done.

00:53:09:20 Q: Thank you Mike Dombeck, Chief of the Forest Service for being with us today. I'm Larry Quinn with the Office of Communications at the U.S. Department of Agriculture in Washington.

**END OF TAPE**