

Forest Log Interview with Steve Thomas

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Forest Log (FL): *How did you feel when you received the first agency "Working Guidelines Award"?*

Steve Thomas (ST): I felt really good about that. I thought the Working Guidelines were a great idea when the Executive Team developed them in the mid-1980s and I became more in-tune with them when I conducted various training courses like Improving Personal Effectiveness.

When I got into Human Resources, I wanted to figure out how we improve our use of the guidelines throughout the agency. I wanted to find other ways to drive the guidelines deeper in the organization and utilize them. We used them in interviews when we were hiring people into Human Resources. We would tell interviewees to look at the guidelines and then ask a couple of questions; just to get some feedback on them and how they reacted to them.

Over the years, we have revised the Working Guidelines a couple of times to ensure they are relevant to the organization and the employees.

As I talked to people in the department, they really believed in them. New employees felt they were a really valuable tool to have in the organization. I like the idea that folks felt I contributed to that. So I appreciate the award.

FL: *How did you come to Forestry? You were in the Navy, right?*

ST: Right. I got out of the Navy in December of 1975 and still wanted to go into forestry because there aren't too many trees on the ships. The Navy asked me to stay in and they would send me to graduate school. But I told them that I went to school to be a forester and I still wanted to give that a try.

I got married about two months after I got out of the service and then basically started looking for work. There wasn't a whole lot of work around and then I found out about some interviews down at OSU. Ed Kelly, who was part of the Resource Planning group at that time, was interviewing for some seasonal folks to perform an underproductive forestland survey, which meant looking at brush fields in the coast range from Astoria to Coquille.

They hired me as a temporary forest technician in March of 1976 and that was the start of my career with Forestry.

FL: *Then your first permanent job was in Klamath Falls in the State Forests Program?*

ST: Yes. Actually, Don Smith and I were hired as technicians and we started on the same day. Don Matlick was the new Unit Forester.

I worked down there maybe a year - things were moving fast then. Then I got a job at Western Lane, in Veneta. It was half-time State Forests in contract administration and half-time as a Forest Practices Officer. I learned a whole lot in a short period of time. I was there about a year, also.

Then I got the job in Prineville as Lands Specialist. They wanted somebody to oversee State Forest lands across all of eastern Oregon plus other projects.

At that time, there quite a few acres of Common School Lands scattered throughout eastern Oregon, but we really weren't doing much on them. As it turned out, that portion of my job really didn't take much time since it was very difficult to manage those tracts. I was in Prineville about three years and primarily worked as an assistant to the Assistant to the Area Director—Tim Keith. In addition to State Forests, I worked in Forest Practices, Fire, and Service Forestry, and whatever else they wanted me to work on.

FL: *Was that the first time you did much work in fire?*

ST: Pretty much. I did a little bit in Klamath Falls and Western Lane, but Prineville was probably the first time it was a concentrated effort for me. Fred Graf was the Area Director and Fred wanted all of his people involved in the fire program. In fact, he even gave us a bladder bag, a shovel, an axe, and a sleeping bag for our vehicles so we would always be ready to respond to a fire.

We had three station wagons in the area staff. Tim and I got to replace one vehicle and we thought maybe since we were going back and forth to Salem—a long distance—we should get something a little more economical. So we ended up with a Dodge Omni. What was funny was Fred just couldn't understand why we would want something like that—how were we going to sleep in the back of that type of car when we got called to a fire?

FL: *Did you do any fire team work?*

ST: I got on a fire team in 1979—while I was still in Prineville. I started out as a fire team dispatcher. At that time, the positions had

more than one function. So if you were a dispatcher, you oversaw where the resources were, you were in charge of communications, and you coordinated runners and that sort of thing. Then I did a little support work on the team—worked in ordering supplies and providing camp services. But my official designation was as a dispatcher.

I got off the team when I got into Salem, but I got called and participated in the 1986 and 1987 fires. So I did it for eight years or so.

FL: *When did you come into Salem to do State Forests Program contract administration?*

ST: I came in to Salem in 1981 and I worked in State Forests until 1990—about nine years. During that time, I worked with timber sale and service contracts, real estate transactions—deeds, easements, and permits—and spent some time as the business manager and the program's training coordinator. So, it was quite a bit of variety.

FL: *And then you went into Human Resources in 1990?*

ST: Yes. I had actually applied for the job in the mid 1980s. I thought it might be kind of interesting, but I didn't get the job then. I had worked with Jerry Batten, the Training Specialist, quite a bit because I liked training and we worked together presenting instructor training and other training projects. I thought that if I really wanted to get into human resources, I needed to find out what it was all about beyond just the training aspect.

So I took a series of classes—they had a certificate program at Portland State University on Human Resources. I went up there and took a class a term. After going through the classes, I felt an HR job would be really interesting. I got the opportunity in 1990 when they needed a new Personnel Director. If I had to pick the most rewarding job in my career, it would be the Human Resources Director job. I got the opportunity to work with everyone in the agency. While the work was difficult in many ways, it also was incredibly rewarding. I had that job for about 11 years until 2001.

In 2001, I applied for the Assistant State Forester position. I still liked my Human Resources job. I just figured that I wanted to do something different and I thought that the organization could benefit by having somebody else in the Human Resources Director position for a while. I was thinking about two options at that time. I thought that either I would leave the organization for some other sort of Human Resources position or there might be something else that would come up in the agency that I liked. There were only a couple of jobs that I was

really thinking about and it just so happened that one of those jobs came open, the Assistant State Forester job, which I ended up with.

FL: *So you transferred into the Assistant State Forester job, and got involved in the subsequent forest management planning and all of those experiences.*

ST: Yes, it's been an interesting five years. I was telling Jim Paul that things happen in stages. When Ray Craig was here, they were trying to figure out a lot of the foundational pieces, such as the greatest permanent value rule and then drafting the forest management plans.

When I came on board, it was time to implement the plans. They were approved by the Board in 2001 and in 2003 the first implementation plans were approved. So, we had to get things rolling as well as deal with the folks who once they knew it was going to be implemented decided there were things they didn't like.

Now we have implemented the plans for five years and it is time for the next group to come along and figure out how we can make this better—how do we keep the dream alive and make it better? I feel good that we were able to keep the train on the track and get the data processed and get the plans implemented. We got some good work done during these past five years that I think gives everybody a good foundation from which to move forward and make it better.

FL: *You got to work with some different people then, too, as Assistant State Forester.*

ST: Yes, it was different from the previous 11 years. Being in Human Resources, you don't work with many of our regular constituents. Some of them had no idea where I came from. They would ask me how long I had been with Forestry and I would tell them I had worked here for 25 years and they wanted to know where I had been all that time.

That has been advantageous to some degree, but it also took longer to get acquainted with who was who, that sort of thing. I think having a little more acquaintance with the folks would have been a little more helpful. Jim will have that because he has worked with many of those folks in Forest Practices. My strength came from the fact that I worked with a lot of our field folks so in terms of working internally, I felt really good about that. But the external groups—that took a little more work.

FL: *When you were in Human Resources, did you do that much work with the Legislature?*

ST: No, not really. We did a little bit of work, but it was mostly in support of DAS issues. In terms of submitting legislation, I think we submitted a couple of proposals over that time-

frame—the police and fire benefits, things like that. So we got involved in it, but it wasn't the same as an operating program. I also served on a couple of committees that helped DAS develop some new legislation,

Board of Forestry meetings were new to me in the Assistant job. In Human Resources, I hardly ever went to board meetings – maybe once in 11 years. When Taunie Murray was hired as the new Human Resources Director, she asked me about having to attend board meetings and so I told her once in 11 years. And then, of course, she had to do the recruitment for a new State Forester and spent all sorts of time with the Board.

When I first started the Assistant State Forester job, someone asked me what was different than Human Resources. I said two things were noticeable in this short time frame. In Human Resources, going into the field meant presenting a class or going to somebody's office. If it was somebody's office, you closed the door most of the time. Going into the field as Assistant State Forester frequently meant that you actually got to go into the forest and think about trees. That's really nice—being in the woods again. The second thing that was different was my first Board tour in the Blue Mountains. I had never been on a tour in the forests where they have port-a-potty that followed you all around and a pickup truck with cold drinks. Now, that's my kind of forest tour.

FL: *You recently received your 30th service award; is that right?*

ST: Yes – on March 1. I have just a little over 30 years.

FL: *Is there a part of it that you enjoyed the most or the least?*

ST: All jobs have pieces that you would just as soon not do. However, I have immensely enjoyed my career. I've had the opportunity to work in a number of different locations, learn different jobs, and work with so many wonderful folks. All of those experiences have been unique and very fulfilling. Here are just a few examples.

In Western Lane, I got to be both a Forest Practices Forester and work in State Forests management. At that time they were providing a great deal of training for Forest Practices Foresters, so I to take advantage of that. I also had the opportunity to experience the first fire where we sent people to California. Lee Oman took a contingent of about 20 of us down to northern California for one of their big 100,000-acre fires. So I got to trundle along with everybody and experience that.

Prineville was just a wonderful job because area jobs are really unique. I got to work

with multiple districts and Salem staff. I was involved with a program called "Condition Red" that dealt with the mountain pine beetle as it marched through Central Oregon. And, as I previously mentioned, I got my start on fire teams in Prineville.

When I came into Salem to work with State Forests, we went through some really crazy times. That's when we did all the roll-backs on the timber sales because the market dropped out. Then Burrell Birch, who handled real estate, retired and they asked me to do the real estate work at the same time. So, I got to do that and that was all new. After a while, contracts got a little more routine than I really liked to be. But at that point in time, they asked me to run the Business Section. So, anyway, it was lot of learning and new things to do.

But Human Resources is probably where there is a bright side and the down side. I used to tell people that in my office I had a Darth Vader and I had a Don Quixote—Darth Vader represented the dark side and Don Quixote was "dream the impossible dream". In Human Resources, you end up moving along that continuum numerous times in a day. Hopefully, you don't have to stay on the dark side very long.

As an Assistant State Forester, I got the opportunity to go and testify in Washington, D.C. I never thought I would ever do that in my career. I just did it once, but that was a cool experience. All these experiences have their ups and downs, but the scale is way on the positive side. One of my most enjoyable experiences was working with the Tillamook Forest Center and seeing that get underway.

FL: *That was a big deal – that was a hard project and you were there for a great deal of it.*

ST: Yes, we had just really gotten into the funding piece and we had some legislative hurdles to overcome. I tried to be as supportive as possible, and tried to knock down barriers. There were some difficult times, but, overall, the Center was tremendously rewarding experience.

Overall, I would say it's been a wonderful career and I've learned so much. Hopefully, I've been able to contribute a little bit as I went along. My wife asked me how I was feeling about leaving. I said that I've always told everybody that if you worked for an employer of choice and you felt that you have been able to contribute and that you've been valued by the organization that whenever you leave, for whatever reason—either a new job opportunity, retirement, whatever—you ought to feel a little pain. I feel a little pain, but I'll get through it. I'm going to go do something different, but don't know quite what that is, so I'm kind of excited. It is almost like when I left

I'm leaving one world and going into a different world. That can be a little scary for anybody because you were comfortable in that old world and you don't know what this new world is going to look like. But you're excited about going into the new one. I think retirement is sort of that same way—just a new adventure.

FL: Julie has also recently retired. What kinds of plans do you have?

ST: We have some things planned for this summer. We are going to take the first week off and go to the beach—just make a transition that way. And then we have signed up for golf lessons twice a week from 1 to 2:30 in the afternoon. How decadent is that? Golfing in the middle of the day? For a long time we have wanted to take some Shakespeare classes at Chemeketa and then probably take a long weekend and go down to Ashland and see about four plays. We went once before. Julie is the Shakespearian. She took classes and almost minored in Shakespeare. I think we are going to take on a road trip in late August or early September. We've got a couple of destinations in mind—one could be back to South Dakota and see sights along the way or one could be up to British Columbia and Vancouver Island. That's the near future and then we've got other ideas about other things. We may move into another house somewhere down the road depending on how things work out.