



Respect, Creativity, and Fairness

OSU alum shares his leadership philosophy as Deputy Forest Supervisor of the Fremont-Winema

by Bryan Bernart

To visit the Fremont-Winema National Forest is to understand the meaning of the word “immense.” Extending from the edge of Crater Lake National Park to the Oregon/California border, its 2.3 million acres contain the kind of wide open spaces people used to sing about in folk songs. Paradoxically, the opportunity to experience not just a place, but an entire landscape in almost total seclusion, if one so chooses, draws thousands of visitors to the Forest every year for boating, camping, fishing,

hunting, hiking, birdwatching, horseback riding, and many other outdoor activities.

To supervise a forest this size appears a herculean task; just to drive from one border to another other takes more than three hours at highway speeds. The forest comprises seven ranger districts, staffed by over 250 employees working across a large range of forestry fields—recreation, fire, timber, botany, fisheries, range, water, and wildlife , to name just a few—while collaborating with tribes, elected officials, neighboring landowners, and timber customers. So, how does one approach management?

With creative problem solving, strategic thinking—and a leadership philosophy that has some unconventional twists, explains Deputy Forest Supervisor Eric Watrud, an OSU alumnus (NR, 2000). “Every day is different, and because of that, the work constantly challenges my creativity,” he says. “There are lots of opportunities to apply strategic thinking, because, in a given day, 15 different crises can pop up, and you have to be able to prioritize between them. You have to make sure you’re showing everybody (employees, visitors, neighboring landowners, and everyone else)



respect by getting back to them quickly, while simultaneously not rushing into important decisions.”

An emphasis on respect is an important aspect of Watrud’s leadership philosophy. The most important thing one can do, in any position, is to treat others fairly, he says. “If you’re respectful to others, they’ll behave respectfully in turn. That’s something I’ve always believed in, and it’s especially helpful when disagreements come up, which is a natural part of work.”

Complexity is a natural part of work for managing issues that arise on the Fremont-Winema National Forest, Watrud says, and for that reason it’s critically important that a supervisor trusts his or her staff to do their work well. “Delegation is a real art, because, especially for a new manager, it can be tempting to try to solve everything yourself—but that won’t work,” Watrud says. “At the Forest we have a host of professionals across different disciplines that I can turn to and ask their opinion, advice, or counsel. By using that resource, together, the Leadership Team can point the whole Forest in the right direction.”

But that’s not all, Watrud explains. In his view, sometimes the best person for a job may be someone unexpected. “In management, it’s critically important to always be on the lookout for future development,” he notes. “Suppose that, every time you have a particular issue, you give it to Person A. That may work fine; however, sometimes it’s good to let Person B take a crack at it. Although due to their lack of familiarity, or more limited skills, they may not get it done as quickly or as thoroughly as Person A, they now have a chance to grow and improve, as well as



provide new insights that you or Person A may not have seen before.”

This understated yet effective leadership style based on teamwork, cooperation, and mutual respect was evident during his undergraduate years at OSU. Watrud came to OSU knowing that he wanted to study forestry here because, as he says simply, without boasting, it was the best forestry school in the country. Upon enrolling, Watrud discovered another advantage: the freedom to set his level of involvement in its many academic clubs. He leapt right in, eventually becoming the head of the Natural Resources Club, as well as chairing the OSU student chapter of the Society of American Foresters (SAF), which included hosting the student activities at the SAF National Convention. In his senior year, Watrud was chosen to receive the prestigious Harold Bowerman Leadership Award, given to students who demonstrate outstanding service to the College of Forestry or to OSU.

His unconventional advice to undergraduates, the next generation of leaders, who seek to chart a similar path through academia? “I learned at OSU that part of being a leader is that you don’t make yourself stand out,” he says. “You work with who’s around you, and help match people’s strengths to their interests—if you let people work on things they’re passionate about, they’ll turn in great work.” As for himself? “I’m really grateful to be able to do what I do,” Watrud says. “I’ve really been blessed in my life.”

One final note: it should be no surprise that this interview found Watrud attending a leadership conference in Portland. “It’s a good opportunity to connect with the other forest supervisors from around Oregon and Washington,” he says. “It enables us to ensure we’re all moving in the same direction.”

All photos courtesy of the Fremont-Winema National Forest, USDA Forest Service.

