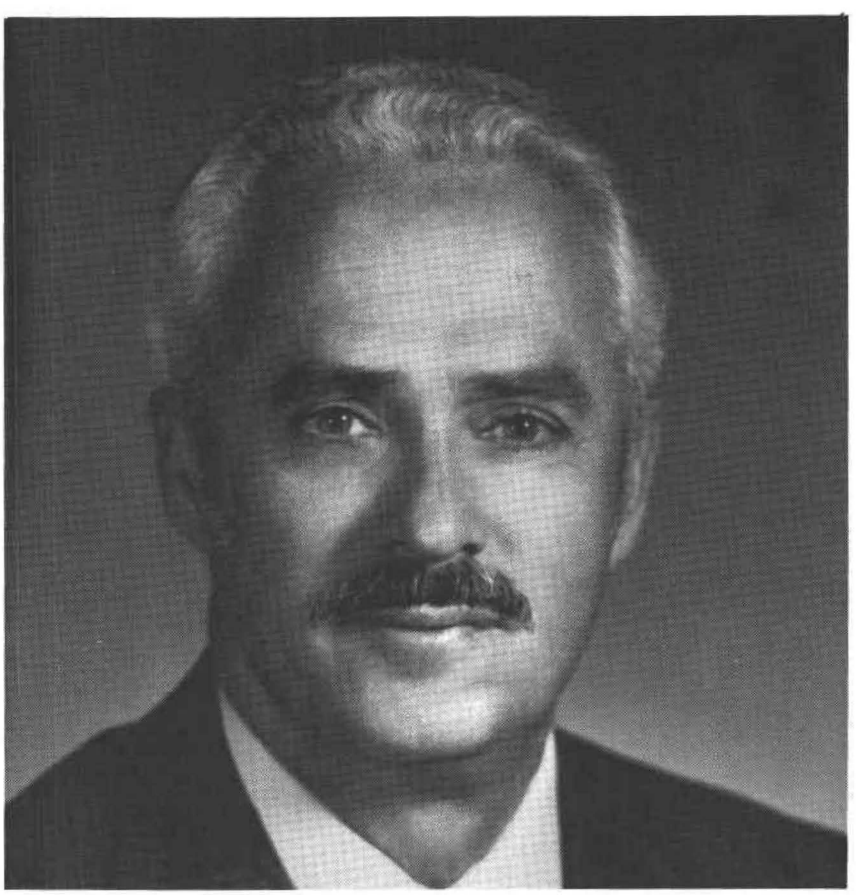
United States
Department of
Agriculture

Forest Service

Interview with Jeff M. Sirmon Deputy Chief for International Forestry



Note: This is a revised version of an oral history transcript based on two interview sessions held with Jeff Sirmon in the Washington office, June 15 and 17, 1993. Deputy Chief Sirmon agreed to the format as a way to preserve his personal account of the changes in the program since the 1990 Farm Bill established the new Deputy area.

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Interview with Jeff M. Sirmon Deputy Chief for International Forestry

by
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Forest Service Historian
Washington, DC

Background

West: This is Terry West, Forest Service Historian, taping an interview with Jeff Sirmon, Deputy Chief for International Forestry in the Washington Office.
Why don't you give some of your background, going way back, and starting with your date of birth and the location.
Sirmon: I was born October 14, 1935, in the very small community of Franklin, Alabama.

West: Your parents' occupations?
Sirmon: My father was a farmer, and my mother was a housewife.

West: You went to high school in that same location?
Sirmon: I attended a 3-room school for the first 5 years of elementary school in Franklin. After the 5th grade, I was bussed 17 miles to junior high and high school in Monroeville, Alabama, the county seat. I finished high school in 1954 and then went to Auburn University and got a degree in civil engineering in 1958.

West: Why did you end up in civil engineering? Was there a family influence?
Sirmon: That is a good question. I was born and raised on a family farm. We worked very hard through my teenage years. I liked farming, but we didn't have enough land and resources to do the kind of farming I would have liked as a career.
I was exposed to construction while farming, and I had a desire to build things. So I studied civil engineering, thinking I would go into highway, railroad, or airplane construction.
This was about the time (1955 to 1964) the Federal Interstate Highway System was being developed. Large public works were very much in vogue at that time, and I think I just got caught up in the building spirit of the country.

West: Yet you ended up in a Forest Service career. How did that transition take place?
Sirmon: When I was a senior in college, I started thinking about the kind of work environment I wanted. I still enjoyed farming and being close to the land. I started looking around for organizations that offered similar environments.
While interviewing highway departments and railroad and aircraft companies, I ran across the Forest Service.
I had heard about the Forest Service owning a lot of land, and I was convinced that I did not want to work in an urban environment. The fact that the Forest Service had 190 million acres where one had lots of freedom was attractive to me.

"The Forest Service offered the lowest-paying job; however, I liked its mission."

First Forest Service Post

A college friend had worked one or two summers for the Forest Service and had enjoyed the experience. It was easy to get a job back in 1958 and I got several job offers. The Forest Service offered the lowest-paying job; however, I liked its mission best.

West: Was that in your field? Was that in engineering?
Sirmon: Yes. I hired on as a GS-5 junior engineer. About 6 months later, I had to spend 6 months of active time in the Army Corps of Engineers. About a year after returning to the Forest Service, as the result of the Berlin Crisis caused by the Soviets blocking off the city of Berlin, I was called back into the Army. I served 8 months in that hitch!
I hired on in 1958 with the Forest Service to do engineering work and actually stayed in the field of engineering for 15 years of my career. I started work in Alabama surveying roads, constructing campgrounds, and building sites. In 1960, I was transferred to South Carolina, where Shirley and I and our 6-month-old son Jeff, Jr., moved into our first home. Six months later we had to move again because of the Berlin blockade crisis.

West: Great timing!
Sirmon: Great timing! In fact, it was the day before Thanksgiving 1961 that I was notified that I was to report to the Army in North Carolina in 10 days. So I went into the Army for 8 months at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, in support of the Special Forces. After 8 months, rather than going back to South Carolina, I then returned to Atlanta, Georgia, to the regional office. I worked in the engineering group until October, when I was offered a job as forest engineer on the Lassen National Forest in northern California. I had wanted to go west where the Forest Service was big business. Earlier, a mentor of mine in the Forest Service advised me to go to Utah—Utah is where the Forest Service is great! However, not until 14 years later did we find ourselves in Utah.

Lassen National Forest

West: Did you intersect with Paul Sweetland?
Sirmon: Yes.

West: He began his Forest Service career as an engineer in California.
Sirmon: There were a number of us young engineers who started out in 1958, 1959, and 1960. When I got to California, they were desperate for engineers because of expanding programs and the rapid turnover of personnel. In fact, I was the first graduate engineer to be forest engineer on the Lassen National Forest.

West: Well, I was going to mention that Paul Sweetland, at least, had said that the foresters in the agency were a little concerned about who these engineers were. It was almost a new profession, and they weren't quite sure what to do with them. Did you experience this kind of reception?
Sirmon: I sure did. There was discrimination. It was difficult for a new professional discipline to move into the Forest Service, particularly in a region like Region 5 (Pacific Southwest Region), where the foresters had ruled the administration of all aspects of forestry for 30 or 40 years or longer.

"... one staff officer said ... engineers should be killed before we multiplied."

"We were building 150 to 200 miles of road a year."

In fact, one staff officer said that we engineers should be killed before we multiplied. I was very young—I was like 25 years old—when I was made a forest engineer, which is too much responsibility at that young age.

West: This was also a time period when the agency started moving into large-scale timber sales.
Sirmon: Right. The year I moved to the Lassen National Forest they increased the allowable sale program from 160 million board feet a year to 230 million board feet a year, which required a large program of road construction.
During my first year in Region 5, we had two 50-year floods, and we started looking at the creation of the Job Corps Program. A year or so later we received substantial increases in funding for an accelerated program to build roads into the roadless areas. We were building 150 to 200 miles of road a year. I had a peak organization of 200 people just in engineering.

West: You are talking about the Lassen National Forest?
Sirmon: The Lassen National Forest alone, one national forest.

West: Kept you busy?
Sirmon: Kept me very busy!
In addition to that, the forest engineer normally was in charge of forest fire suppression. So, I immediately took on the job of providing service on large fires. This was a new experience for me, although my military training and engineering training equipped me well to fulfill that role. I taught service for the regional fire training center for several years.

West: Was that a kind of preparation for going into management as a line officer?
Sirmon: Not completely. Not near as much as just the day-to-day job of engineering administration, which gave me much more preparation for going into broader line management than did fire control.

West: When did that happen? I am trying to condense your career path here a bit.
Sirmon: When I went into management?

West: Yes.
Sirmon: 1974. Before that I spent time in Region 8 (Southern Region), in California as a forest engineer, 2 years in San Francisco at the regional office, and 3 years in the Washington Office in engineering management. I went to Region 1 (Northern Region), Missoula, as the regional engineer in 1972.
This was the period (1972) President Nixon was trying to decentralize government. He proposed setting up 10 standard regions, which would have abolished several regional offices and established one or two new ones. The Northern Region would have been one of those abolished. We were in a very uncertain period from 1972 until 1974, when Senator Mike Mansfield (D-MT) said, "Stop this nonsense. You're not going to reorganize the Forest Service."
During this uncertainty, a number of people were choosing jobs in locations that were more secure. Also, during this time, the Forest

"I had never dreamed of going into line management."

Service was looking at new ways to structure the regional offices. The new prescribed organizational pattern for all regional offices established 3 Deputy Regional Foresters: one for State and Private; one for the National Forest System; and one for Administration.

Regional Forester

At that time, I was asked to go to Ogden, Utah, as the Deputy Regional Forester for Resources.
I had never dreamed of going into line management. At that time, there had never been an engineer as a Regional Forester.

West: Right.
Sirmon: Shortly after that, Max Peterson [an engineer] was selected as Regional Forester in Region 8.
Anyway, we moved from Montana to Ogden, Utah, in 1974 and I started a very steep learning curve to meet the requirements of my new job.
Region 4 (Intermountain Region) had a large range, recreational, and minerals workload, which were fields somewhat new to me. I had the innate ability to pick up on grazing and mineral issues because of my farming and construction background.

West: From there, you leaped to the Washington Office?
Sirmon: No. I was in the Intermountain Region as Deputy Regional Forester for 6 years, and when then-Regional Forester Vern Hamre retired in 1979, I was promoted to Regional Forester. In 1981, I was asked to go to Region 6 (Pacific Northwest Region) as Regional Forester. I was there for 4 years (1981 to 1985). During this period we set the foundation for Forest Planning and shifted into a more balanced multiple-use program in Region 6. It was extremely exciting. The 4 years there were very, very satisfying.
I had an organization of 9,000 people, a $600 million budget, and more work than you can shake a stick at. During that time the Assistant Secretary of Agriculture was John Crowell, who was moved from industry in the Pacific Northwest to become Assistant Secretary of Agriculture, and this made life even more interesting.

International Forestry

West: During your career in the field was International Forestry on the radar screen of National Forest System staff? In other words, out in the field, was anyone really aware that there was even an international forestry staff or mission in the Washington Office based in research?
Sirmon: It was a very low blip on the screen. In a place like Region 6 or Region 4, it was primarily thought of as a program which allowed for exchange of scientists, exchanging technical information, receiving foreign visitors, and interacting with international organizations, although I was not involved in any international organizations. So it was very, very low on the screen.

"... I had not thought about working in international forestry."

West: Now, you arrived here (the Washington Office) in 1985?
Sirmon: Yes.

West: On which staff?
Sirmon: I moved in as the Deputy Chief for Programs and Legislation.

West: Did you have interest in international forestry issues before being asked to be Deputy Chief for International Forestry?
Sirmon: During the first 32 years of my career, I had not thought about working in international forestry.

West: That plan sure changed fast. What happened that changed your position?
Sirmon: I began to get some exposure to international forestry issues. Recall what was happening during the 1980s on the global scene and the fact that the newspapers, TV, and magazines were full of articles on global climate change, global warming, the destruction of the rain forest.
This piqued my interest in terms of what could be done internationally, but not from the standpoint that someday I would be a part of an international forestry organization.
I did get involved in accommodating some of the exchange of foreign visitors even while I was in the Pacific Northwest Region. I participated in the United States/Japan Natural Resources Panel on Forestry, which allowed me to travel to Japan in the mid-1980s.
Then, in 1989, the World Bank asked me to give them advice on Brazil's capability in expanding its national forests. I spent three weeks in Brazil along with the World Bank officials. This increased my interest dramatically. I could see opportunities where I might make a contribution, as well as use the skills of the Forest Service personnel.
There was some interest in, say, 1988, 1989, 1990, in personally getting more involved internationally. The tenor of the country was such that some politicians were beginning to look at global situations and explore ways for more active U.S. intervention to help halt deforestation.
This was about the time we saw the pictures from outer space showing the Amazon forests burning. We were beginning to get reports from FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations) on the extent of deforestation worldwide.
The political scene was sensitized at that time for something. In fact, in 1990, the Interior Appropriations Committee, for the first time, appropriated money directly to the Forest Service for international training and technology transfer and also gave the Forest Service additional authority to operate internationally.

1990 Farm Bill

West: Where did the 1990 Farm Bill fit into this development?
Sirmon: The fundamental groundwork for International Forestry being a part of the 1990 Farm Bill was set during the decade of the 1980s when the conditions and trends of the world's forests were being discussed on the front pages of many newspapers around the

world in relation to the broader issues of climate change, global warming, and depletion of the ozone layer. In addition, the Brundtland report, published in 1987, entitled "Our Common Future," further set the stage for nations to respond to the problems of declining forests, particularly in the tropics.

Food and environmental security were taking on new meaning and new importance as we began to realize that the resources on the planet were finite, that population was continuing to grow at a rapid pace, and that we were indeed destroying elements of our environment. The fact that humankind could destroy its environment was being realized by more and more people.

The Brundtland Commission and their subsequent report, "Our Common Future," very eloquently pointed out the need to be concerned about what our neighbors do and what we do, particularly as it affects the common resources. When one realizes that these resource commons are being adversely affected by the behavior of other nations, then it's in our best interest to see if we can change that behavior. Forestry falls in this category; hence, the interest and need for the United States to be concerned about the conditions and trends of the world's forests.

On the other hand, developing nations look at the pattern of development of developed nations and see that we, the developed nations, have exploited our natural resources, particularly our forests, as we've built our wealth. Developing nations say, "If you don't let us develop our forests, you are denying us the ticket to a better life. If you don't want us to cut our forests, then give us something in return."

To further heighten the awareness, space pictures taken by our astronauts in 1987 and 1988 showed widespread burning in the Brazilian Amazon, which prompted a number of trips to that area by U.S. politicians. Also in 1989 or thereabouts, Congressman Bruce Vento (D-MN) traveled to Puerto Rico and was impressed by the capability of the Forest Service to be of assistance in global problems, and this resulted in further support for the Forest Service being used in a leadership role in global forestry matters.

Also during 1989, 1990, and 1991, preparations for the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) were taking place through the PrepCon planning process series of 4 negotiating sessions with approximately 160 countries of the world.

The Forest Service was an active participant with the State Department in these negotiation sessions.

Over this same timeframe, there were some internal reviews on tropical forestry and some thinking about the need to elevate International Forestry within the Forest Service.

I think there was a convergence of interest and thought during the drafting of the 1990 Farm Bill and perhaps some suggestions put in by those interested in a broader leadership role, which resulted in the wording in the Farm Bill.

I might add that the Bush Administration did not put forward any ideas during the drafting of the 1990 Farm Bill. This is interesting in that the administration in power usually, I am told, drafts their own Farm Bill, which becomes the centerpiece for the framing of the upcoming bill. It was apparent that the Bush Administration wasn't taking the lead on hardly any legislation, but it was really

strange that an institution like the Farm Bill, which has been around for almost 100 years, did not have a proposal from the administration. I remember setting up an appointment with USDA Undersecretary of International Affairs and Commodity Programs Richard Crowder, and Franklin Bailey, Assistant Secretary for Congressional Relations, to alert them to the intelligence we were getting concerning the fact that there would be a forestry title in the Farm Bill. We thought this was important, since no other Farm Bill for the last 95 years had a forestry title in it. I advised Undersecretary Crowder that we should try to find out what was being proposed and that we analyze the advantages and disadvantages of the various items pertaining to forestry that were being proposed. His reaction was very strange. Instead of agreeing to find out what was being discussed, he, in effect, accused the Forest Service of not being a team player on the Secretary's team and making an end run around the administration in dealing directly with key members on the Hill. This was not the case at all from my standpoint in matters dealing with international forestry.

At the time, I was Deputy Chief for Programs and Legislation. I also met with Assistant Secretary Bailey to explain what was happening in the framing of the Farm Bill and to impress upon him the need to get more information and be prepared to respond during Farm Bill hearings. He agreed with the need, but he would not give it high enough priority to make the appropriate appointments and follow through.

Wider Context

My being selected as the first Deputy Chief for International Forestry should be viewed in the context of what was needed and required during a very short period of time following the enactment of the Farm Bill. The Farm Bill required that the Secretary of Agriculture establish an Office of International Forestry within 6 months after the passage of the bill. The bill was signed into law in December 1990, which meant that by June 1991 the office was supposed to be established. Some of the early questions and situations that had to be addressed were the following: the role, mission, and relationships of this new direction had to be defined and communicated; and this new responsibility had to be accepted by the Committees of Jurisdiction and the Appropriations Committees. The role we identified for ourselves could not be in too much conflict with other players in international work. The participation of other entities within the Forest Service had to be made clear and accepted, and the organizational reconfiguration within the Forest Service had to be defined. Also during this time, the conditions and trends of the world's forests were being discussed in the national and international press, and the world was preparing for UNCED. Leadership in responding to all of these issues was also needed during this period of time.

Job Requirements

The reason for describing the atmosphere during and shortly following the Farm Bill is to show that experience in international work wasn't necessarily what was needed during this period of identification and transition. What was needed was experience and ability to operate in the executive and legislative circles within our Government, the ability to form partnerships and to gain acceptance by a wide community of interest, and the knowledge of all functions within the Forest Service so that these functions could be properly incorporated into the planning and structure of the new Deputy area.

Another consideration was the fact that the Chief wanted all Deputies to be members of the Senior Executive Service (SES), and there was no way we could advertise and select a person who was not already in the SES within this short timeframe. Hence, it was concluded that an existing Senior Executive from somewhere in Government would be put into this new Deputy position. Chief and Staff were aware of this new opportunity that Congress had given us, and we did not want to appear uninterested by proposing that we wait until an SES ceiling was available or wait until funding was provided or use some other bureaucratic reason for not moving ahead. Instead, we decided that we would take an existing Senior Executive with considerable Forest Service experience to help define, organize, and gain acceptance of our new expanded role.

My background in having been Regional Forester for two Regions in the Forest Service—the last being the Pacific Northwest, which is by far the largest Region in terms of budget, employees, and resources—would be useful for this new assignment. In addition, my 5 years experience as Deputy Chief for Programs and Legislation, which directed the Forest Service policy planning, strategic planning, budgets, legislative affairs, and environmental coordination, prepared me to operate in the arenas that would be necessary for establishing a firm foundation for this new program.

West: Your background prepared you for the assignment?

Sirmon: Yes, I think my background in the National Forest System was very helpful in gaining acceptance for international forestry, not only in the Washington Office, but throughout the agency. I was able to communicate to elements in the organization those messages necessary to gain acceptance and support. I was also able to direct employees in the International Forestry organization, who had very little knowledge of the greater Forest Service, to communicate in such a way that promoted a greater understanding and acceptance throughout the organization.

New Mission Thoughts

West: What went through your mind in this interim period between the passage of the Farm Bill and your being named to a new, separate Deputy area?

"... the idea of a separate Deputy area was not well received by most of Chief and Staff."

Sirmon: After the Farm Bill was signed into law, but before I was appointed as Deputy Chief, there was a period of about 6 or 7 months in which I had a number of thoughts about how we might organize and identify this new mission within the Forest Service.
I do know that the original idea of a separate Deputy area was not well received by most of Chief and Staff. They did not think that the program was big enough or could be big enough to warrant establishment of a separate Deputy area.
I thought the first step we should take would be to visit most of the leading organizations that operate in the international arena concerning natural resources, particularly those who made investment decisions and who had projects and programs internationally. Meetings with them were to get better acquainted with their objectives, their roles, and to get some idea from them what the role of the Forest Service might be. I also felt that it was important to get support from the interested and affected congressional committees and particularly to get support from the Foreign Operations Committees that had not historically been concerned with the Forest Service. I am keenly aware of the territorial jealousies that exist between committees, and if we were not going to be received by key committees on the Hill (in Congress), then we would not have much success in getting a good foundation built and a program started.
I thought it important, too, that we involve the entire Forest Service and engage the body of the Forest Service in carrying out our mission and not to try to staff up an independent organization within the Forest Service that had skills that duplicated other skills throughout the rest of the agency.
I also believed Congress had been asking us to move out faster in some areas than we were moving and that the Forest Service had not seized the opportunity to be more proactive.
As far as delivering the Tropical Forestry Program, which was being funded through State and Private Forestry, I had no problems with the way that program was going. I knew that we had developed an operating procedure over a very short period of time without thinking about a broader, more indepth international program. I was convinced that once we defined our expanded mission, the nature of the Tropical Forestry Program would change. I deliberately avoided trying to move the Tropical Forestry Program from State and Private to International Forestry during this period of defining our mission.

Farm Bill Specifics

West: Where in the Farm Bill did the Forest Service International Forestry expansion appear?
Sirmon: Section 2405 of the Farm Bill directed the Secretary, acting through the Chief of the Forest Service, to establish an Office of International Forestry within the Forest Service, within 6 months after the date of enactment of this act. The act went on to say the Chief shall appoint a Deputy Chief for International Forestry and listed several duties. Furthermore, in Section 2406 the bill called for the establishment of a separate budget line item for International Forestry beginning the year after the date of enactment.
The bill did not go into a lot of detail on what the office should do and how it should go about fulfilling its mission. We had a great deal of

freedom to read the signs of the times and what the future might hold, and to develop a mission and vision that would fulfill this new role. The events that were unfolding around us, such as the attention the world was giving to the conditions and trends of the world's forests, the preparation for UNCED, the wording that was in our appropriations language for the Tropical Forestry Program, as well as other language that had been put in various pieces of legislation, gave us a framework in which to design a leadership role in addition to an operational role for this new Deputy area.

Community of Interest

West: William Shands of the Pinchot Institute is an advocate of a community of interest concept. You have organized meetings at Solomon's Island, Maryland, of the "Solomon's Island Group" based on that idea. How did this originate, and how is it working?
Sirmon: Well, first of all, Bill is working on a project that I initiated earlier. I was looking for a more effective leadership model for natural resource managers, building on some concepts I borrowed from Professor Heifetz at Harvard.
I was extremely concerned, after leaving the Pacific Northwest in 1985, that controversial decisions could not be made in a timely way. While I was at Harvard in 1987 attending the JFK School of Government, I was introduced to a concept that opened my eyes to a different leadership model—one that, perhaps, would be more effective than the current leadership model we had in the Forest Service. I have since written several articles on that topic.
A couple of years ago, I entered into a contract with Bill Shands and Jim Giltmier to try to further describe a leadership model based on the community-of-interest concept.
Getting back to your point, what happened shortly after I was named Deputy Chief for International Forestry, I immediately went to the headquarters of about 20 organizations around town that are in international-forestry-type work. Some were nongovernmental organizations, some industry, some trade groups, and some were other government agencies. My purpose was to gain their support for an increased role for the Forest Service in international work.
I wanted to get their ideas on the appropriate role of the Forest Service, and to find out how they made decisions on where they invested their dollars internationally, and I wanted their help and support in developing an international strategic plan for the Forest Service to be incorporated in the 1995 Resource Protection Act report.
Shortly after making this round, I decided to convene this group to see if I could get their support in helping develop our strategic plan, i.e., the RPA. Because of the lack of cross-agency coordination within the Executive Branch, there was a tremendous need for better cooperation.
I found out that the U.S. approach to international forestry programs was so fragmented that there was no organized focus. If we could use the RPA process to bring these people together periodically to develop a strategic plan, then perhaps someday we would have an international plan for forestry that would be agreed

to by USAID (U.S. Agency for International Development), the State Department, EPA (Environmental Protection Agency), the Forest Service, and perhaps others.
So I contracted with Bill Shands and the Pinchot Institute to help put on this day-and-a-half workshop in Solomon's Island, Maryland. The turnout was tremendous. We had turnout from every organization we invited, from policy-level people...

West: Now, that was the first one. What date and year was that held?
Sirmon: It was held in the spring of 1991.

West: What issues emerged? What were the main topics of discussion and debate, if that went on?
Sirmon: Well, first of all, we explained the purpose and the reasons for getting together—there was no forum for people who have a common interest.
The need to convene to talk about our respective roles and responsibilities to seek a harmony of efforts was soon evident. We were in the middle of planning for the UNCED Conference in Rio and the need for the Federal agencies to better coordinate was becoming obvious.
We talked for that day and a half, and shared what each other's roles and responsibilities were for the almost 30 organizations present.
We talked about a proper role for the Forest Service. We discussed the Forest Service's planning process and how we go about strategic planning and the possibility of having an international dimension to the RPA, both in assessment and in programs; and whether or not these groups, particularly the government agencies, could jointly participate in the planning process.

"It almost turned into a kind of a "love-in," in terms of support for the Forest Service."

We had small work groups that created a great number of ideas in that short day and a half. At the end, the assessment of the session was very positive. It almost turned into a kind of a "love-in," in terms of support for the Forest Service.
We knew we had a winner, and we stayed on track and stayed engaged. From the standpoint of the community-of-interest leadership model, I was attempting to have the various entities within the community, with the Forest Service being one of those entities, engage to describe how we wanted to work together in the future.

West: Did that spirit of cooperation continue to exist after your summit? Did that really help to get...
Sirmon: Yes, it did.

West: ...organized and working well, as far as the United States' position?
Sirmon: The first Solomon's Group meeting was 5 or 6 months prior to UNCED. There was another negotiation called PrepCon, a 1-month-long negotiating session in New York City. Between the two groups, they helped bring the forestry community together. When we went to Rio, forestry was a number one priority for the U.S. delegation, as expressed by President George Bush.
There was a consensus on the part of industry and environmental representatives as well as governmental representatives on how we would characterize forestry in the United States.

There was agreement on a number of factors within the forestry debate. So even though this Solomon's Group came along fairly shortly before UNCED, there was a substantial amount of agreement, and I attribute some of that to the Solomons meeting.

West: It did have a useful application in Rio?
Sirmon: In Rio...

West: At least in terms of people being better prepared or better...
Sirmon: Yes, they had a better appreciation for each other's roles. What happened in Rio was that several members of this Solomon's Group were a part of the official delegation, and we were able to support each other.
In fact, just this week [June 1993], a new appointee in the Secretary's office was telling me they remembered our work in Rio because the best-organized interest in Rio was the forestry community; and that we seemed to know what we were doing; whereas the rest of the government groups seemed to be less organized.

UNCED

West: Was the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, UNCED, which took place in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, June 3-14, 1992 a driving force in International Forestry from the time you assumed the Deputy Chief job?
Sirmon: UNCED was not the driving force for International Forestry when I took over the job. UNCED represented those concerns which were expressed in the International Cooperation Act and in the Farm Bill as well as our Tropical Forestry appropriations language, which called for halting deforestation, reducing greenhouse gases, protecting biodiversity, supporting the rights of indigenous people, etc., which are the driving forces.

If Timeline

West: Provide an outline of your personal work, and that of the International Forestry staff, from 1990 onward to respond to the direction in the Farm Bill to set up an Office of International Forestry in the Forest Service.
Sirmon: In early 1991, the Chief called for a white paper to help set direction on International Forestry. The Task Force was headed by Chris Pytel (Washington Office Administration). They produced their report with recommendations gathered from a number of people interviewed across the Forest Service.
Also, in February or March of 1991, I asked Katherine Jesch, an analyst in RPA (keep in mind I was still in Programs and Legislation at that time), to prepare an overview of International Forestry activities, which she did and published in April 1991. This paper was very useful in pulling together a number of facets that made up International Forestry.
In May 1991, Chief Dale Robertson, Dave Harcharik, and I traveled to Brazil for a 10-day orientation and education trip with

the objective of winding up in Brasilia to prepare the first Memorandum of Understanding between the Forest Service and the Brazilian Institute for the Environment and Renewable Natural Resources (IBAMA). As it turned out, the Brazilians were not ready or had not completed all of their work to get the agreement prepared so it could be signed while we were there. But it was signed in August, when Vice President Dan Quayle was in Brasilia.

An interesting side story. While we were in Brazil, the Department of Agriculture named a new Secretary, Secretary Edward Madigan. We thought we were on very high priority work for the Administration, since President Bush had indicated very strongly his concern about the environment, about forestry, and about Brazil in particular. In addition, Assistant Secretary (for Natural Resources and Environment) John Beuter had expressed a strong desire for the Forest Service to take a lead role in strengthening the forestry institutions in Brazil; nevertheless, the new Secretary was very upset about the Chief being out of the country.

In July 1991, the Forest Service celebrated the Centennial of the beginnings of conservation and the National Forest System in Cody, Wyoming, and we hoped that we (the Forest Service) would be able to announce the establishment of the new Deputy area. It was very difficult during this period to get any decisions through the Secretary's office. In fact, the Secretary seemed to be hostile toward the Forest Service on a number of accounts and, in fact, took part in very few, if any, of the Centennial celebrations throughout that entire year. We were able to get the decision made by the Department during the time we were having our Centennial RF&D (Regional Foresters and Directors) meeting in Cody and were able to make the announcement at that meeting.

During most of July and part of August, I spent a lot of time making contacts, visiting the offices of executives and senior officials of about 20 organizations around Washington, DC, apprising them of the significance of the Farm Bill and the establishing of International Forestry at a mission level, and seeking their advice and support as we identified our role and mission. I also made contacts on the Hill with key staffers and members on committees that we normally do not deal with, but that have an interest international matters.

In August, I attended the International Tropical Timber Organization (ITTO) Senior Foresters Conference in Yokohama, Japan, and was able to get acquainted with a number of key forestry leaders throughout the world. Also in August, 4 Deputy Chiefs made a visit to Puerto Rico—Al West, State and Private Forestry; Jim Overbay, National Forest System; Jerry Sesco, Research; and myself.

"Puerto Rico had a long history of factions within the Forest Service ..."

Our main purpose was to review the operations in Puerto Rico and to see if we could improve the efficiency for the delivery of the Forest Service's mission in Puerto Rico. Puerto Rico had a long history of factions within the Forest Service fighting with each other and not being as productive as they should have been. Out of this trip came a number of decisions, one of which was that we would make Puerto Rico the Forest Service's major gateway for the delivery of our international programs to Central and South America, that we would expand our research operations, and that we would put an international presence in Puerto Rico. This led, over the next year, to a reexamination of our total program in Puerto Rico, which resulted in complete reorganization of our operations in Puerto Rico and the

setting up of an International Institute of Tropical Forestry in Puerto Rico with the Director being elevated to the same status as a Regional Forester or a Station Director and reporting directly to the Chief. This case is well documented for the record. The interesting thing about this exercise is that from the time President Bush had made his announcement in Houston at the July 1990 G-7 (Group of 7 industrialized nations) Conference (to set monetary and trade policy), one of his press releases said that we should institute a full-fledged international institute in Puerto Rico. The Forest Service had taken no action building on this suggestion and the President's support. In fact, we were behaving as if we already had an international institute; we just had not called it that. We did not see any opportunity for change. It hit me, however, that here was a major opportunity to restructure the Forest Service in Puerto Rico so that we could not only expand the research side, but also we create an Assistant Director's job for International Operations and bring in the Supervisor of the Caribbean National Forest as a member of the management team for the international institute. In addition, we could greatly expand the mission and services of the library, turning it into a greatly expanded information and data retrieval organization. This reorganization required another decision by the Secretary of Agriculture, which we were able to obtain. The organization shifted into its new organizational structure in December 1992.

"... the Director of EPA was really the spokesperson for international forestry."

West: I am curious why President Bush in Texas would comment about the station in Puerto Rico? Do you have any inkling?
Sirmon: I don't know who put that in the press release. I will say that over this last 2 years or so that the State Department and EPA played a large role in elevating the image of forestry. In fact, in terms of an international spokesperson for forestry, the Director of EPA was really the spokesperson for international forestry. It wasn't the Secretary of Agriculture or the Chief of the Forest Service.

West: A pioneer North American tropical forester Tom Gill wrote that USAID relied on the Tropical Institute of Forestry as their primary training area on tropical forestry and had brought interested students from all over, not just from South and Central America, but from India, from Asia. Does it continue in that same kind of educational role?
Sirmon: Yes. In fact, there will be expanded educational efforts, particularly with these new facilities that are being developed in Puerto Rico. There will be conference facilities and some housing facilities with a tropical motif. Our people and the Caribbean National Forest people are very excited about this expanded training and educational role.
The other thing that has happened is that Puerto Rico has become a major tourist port, probably second only to Miami. When cruise travelers arrive in Puerto Rico, they usually have a few hours or a day before they sail, and the El Portal/Caribbean National Forest has become a major attraction. We hope to give entry to hundreds of thousands of international visitors who are passengers on these cruise ships and, impart some forestry education and awareness at our visitor center.

In September 1991, I was chosen by the State Department to head the U.S. Delegation to the 10th World Forestry Congress in Paris. With this assignment I was able to make additional contacts with forestry leaders throughout the world, and I appeared on the World Forestry Congress program 3 different times. The U.S. delegation, about 50 people from the Forest Service and about 200 from the United States at large, was extremely active and made a significant contribution to the conference. There is an excellent report in the files on our accomplishments. We also arranged to sign our first supplemental agreement with Brazil at the Paris Conference.

At the World Forestry Congress, the Chairman of the House Agriculture Committee, E. (Kika) de la Garza (D-TX) and Congressman Sid Morrison (R-WA) were prominently featured at the U.S. reception that was attended by over 500 participants, both of them had been instrumental in getting international forestry into the Farm Bill. They spent 2 days at the conference, which further strengthened the new international organization and gave it a high profile.

Later, in the United States, members of both the House and Senate gathered for a small celebration on February 5, 1992, to mark the completion of the final actions required to create the International Forestry Deputy Area. I have a number of pictures and other material concerning this seemingly insignificant event that was nevertheless a further recognition of the elevation of International Forestry. It was also during this period that the new International Forestry organization hosted an open house, where we invited our friends around town, especially those who had participated in the Solomon's Group, as well as people from the Hill and the Forest Service. This gave further recognition to the change that was taking place. There was excellent attendance and very good support expressed from those who gathered.

In February 1992, our fiscal year (FY) 1993 budget went to the Hill, and we were chastised by Chairman Bruce Vento (D-MN) and others for not having a separate budget line item for International Forestry. We had decided not to give it high priority because we had the luxury of being able to draw on any fund across all appropriations for international work. A significant contribution from other Deputy areas was being made toward international work, and we were afraid if we pulled this all together under one budget line item, there would be a prohibition against using any other appropriations without reprogramming. The appropriations hearings picked up on the fact that we did not have a separate budget line item, and the Chief promised that the FY 1994 budget, when it came forward, would include a separate line item.

In March 1992, I made a visit to Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and India. This trip was to pave the way and facilitate the identification of areas of collaboration in these countries and to give further visibility to an increased role the Forest Service was playing in international work.

June and July 1992 were devoted mostly to the preparation for the UNCED conference in Rio and to the participation in the conference itself, followed by a 4-day visit to the Pantanal at the request of the Governor of Motto Grosso do Sul. Ambassador Robert Ryan, who was the U.S. representative for the preparation of the UNCED conference and head of the delegation, accompanied me on this trip.

The UNCED conference further focused on forestry and, in fact,

"... the policy announcement was made to change to an ecosystem management approach on Federal lands ..."

forestry was the number one priority for the U.S. delegation in Rio as established by President Bush. It was also during UNCED that President Bush challenged the rest of the G-7 countries to double their commitment to forestry and said that he would take the lead by promising $150 million per year for international forestry as a way to demonstrate his commitment. In addition, while we were in Rio, the policy announcement was made to change to an ecosystem management approach on Federal lands in the United States and to abandon clearcutting as the principal silvicultural practice on Forest Service and BLM-administered lands.

At the Rio Conference, I was engaged daily with policy officials from the White House, State Department, and EPA. I was included in their confidential meetings as well as in meetings from top officials from other countries, particularly the G-7 countries, where we were trying to explain the "Forests for the Future" initiative and how it would be carried out.

The Forest Service had been involved to some degree with the description of "Forests for the Future" before it was announced. We had advised against the process the White House used for announcing this program and, as we predicted, the way the White House handled it was a small disaster. I had advised the White House to let us work with the Ministers of Forestry in the G-7 countries and some of the key developing countries to explain to them what "Forests for the Future" meant, what its purpose was, and how it would be carried out. This would give the policy people in these countries time to discuss it, ask questions, and then brief their Heads of State as well as Presidents so that when President Bush made the announcement, they would be in a position to respond in a knowledgeable way. The way the White House handled it, the announcement caught everyone by surprise, there was not enough detail, and the United States was looked upon with the suspicion that we were trying to sabotage the UNCED conference and draw attention away from the Biodiversity Treaty and the Global Climate Change treaty in which the United States was viewed as dragging its feet. We spent over a week and a half at UNCED trying to explain what "Forests for the Future" meant and why it was good for the other G-7 countries. Even though this did not turn out well for the White House, it further identified [the Forest Service's] International Forestry as a key player for the [U.S.] Government. When we returned from Rio, the White House called for the formation of a working group made up of the Forest Service, EPA, USAID, the State Department, and Smithsonian Institute to further flesh out "Forests for the Future" and its implementation guidelines. In fact, we spent all summer and fall working on this, and a decision was made to launch "Forests for the Future" 2 days before President Bush was to leave office. A small ceremony was held in the White House, with President Bush presiding.

President Bush included $75 million in his proposed FY 1994 budget for "Forests for the Future" to be delivered through EPA and another $75 million to be delivered through the Forest Service. This was in the President's FY 1994 budget message. Of course, during this time we had an election; President Bill Clinton was elected and when he came to office, the entire Bush budget was reorganized to call for financing, of $30 million in FY 1994,

and of $50 million for each of the next four years for "Forests for the Future" through the Forest Service. If it were funded it would mean about a fivefold increase in funding for International Forestry for the Forest Service. More importantly, it would put the Forest Service in a position where we could establish priorities, form partnerships with other entities, and be at center stage in helping set international forestry policy for the administration.

In February 1993, I reviewed our programs in Hawaii and the Pacific Islands, principally to reaffirm our role and mission in that part of the world in preparation for our participation on a task force that was called for under the Akaka bill. We are currently making decisions on the extent and size of our program in Hawaii and the Pacific Islands. There is an excellent report prepared by Katherine Jesch on our operations there, offering some ideas on future organization and programs.

In March 1993, I was Head of the U.S. Delegation to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) Committee on Forestry meeting in Rome, where again I was able to meet additional leaders in forestry and to speak for the U.S. position on a number of items relating to international forestry.

Part II

West: In the journal "Forest Perspectives," Twig Johnson, Director of Forestry, Natural Resources for USAID, talks about the challenge of doing international forestry. He says you have to go beyond the countries' ministers of agriculture. He mentions communicating with other countries' socioeconomic and political leaders in addition to their forestry experts. Have you found that to be true? If so, how have you gone about working with other interests in a country, including the media?

Sirmon: Well, I think it is true. The greatest enemies of forests internationally, particularly in the tropical countries, are poverty and population. Poverty is closely associated with lack of food, and of course, food and agricultural expansion have historically been the enemy of forests. You clear land in order to plant crops; therefore, you reduce forests.

"The greatest enemies of forests internationally, particularly in the tropical countries, are poverty and population."

There are other policies in countries that are trying to relocate people from large cities. Brazil, for example, has tried to transport people from the suburbs and the slums of large cities to the Amazon region. They wanted to increase the population of the Amazon in order to develop the resources there. And, in fact, they had a policy similar to our Homestead Act. They have a program of colonization that rewards people who leave urban areas and resettle in designated rural areas with land grants. Colonizers who clear the forest for agricultural purposes can claim title to the land. It is clear that one must address cross-sectoral problems to be successful in forestry.

In the past, the Forest Service primarily responded to technical needs in international forestry. We were not asked to address the broader aspects of cross-sectoral issues and designing broad plans.

Our overall strategy for delivery at this time is to call on the greater body of the Forest Service to provide most of the skills needed in our international programs. The employees within International Forestry itself will be primarily responsible for identifying and planning for

international needs and securing from the greater body of the Forest Service those skills needed to carry out projects and programs. I'm not looking so much for specialized technical skills from International Forestry employees, but rather for facilitating, coordinating, strategic planning skills, and the ability to operate in an international arena.

With the new dimensions in international forestry and the call for us to get more involved in helping solve forestry problems internationally, we must address cross-sectoral problems.

Up until this point, we have primarily been trying to establish our credentials within the forestry communities in major forest countries. We have done that by working on their high-priority issues or problems. This is the front-end part of our strategy; to go in and get well-established and demonstrate that we can help them solve today's problems, and then, if we develop the credibility and confidence, move into the broader policy areas that will lead to more substantial changes.

We have been well-received in the countries where we are working. There is a high regard for technical forestry in the United States in the international arena.

Sometimes negative messages from our attempts to resolve domestic issues are used in the international arena. Some ask why they should listen to experts from the United States when it doesn't know how to manage its own forests. This has not caused significant problems to date. The press has been fairly receptive in the countries we are working in.

Forest Reserve and Models

West: Is it critical that a nation establish public forest reserves in order to practice sound forestry? The Forest Service has long advocated that Latin American nations establish a system like the National Forest System. Is our system still a good model, or are there alternative models out there today?

Sirmon: Well, I think our system is an excellent one, although it was not designed initially to accomplish all the things that it has accomplished.

Some of the initial policies of our country would have been to put all of the land in private ownership. With the creation of forest reserves in the late 1800s and early 1900s, we started changing that policy of everything going into private ownership.

We began to see that there were public values that could best be protected by a combination of private and public ownership. For instance, we learned some valuable lessons as a result of the devastation of the eastern forests in the 1700s and 1800s. It was from these lessons that people of the Pinchot era said that we needed to change this policy and start reserving forests, particularly in the west.

In the United States, 72 percent of forest land is privately owned, and 58 percent is owned by nonindustrial private landowners (people who own less than 500 hundred acres). Only 14 percent is owned by industrial forest companies, and around 8 percent is in other types of ownership. The Forest Service manages 19 percent. I think this is a good combination of stakeholders with varied

objectives: the National Park Service, having an objective primarily of preservation; the National Forest System, one of multiple use; and the private landowner, one of dominant use based on the owners' objectives.
The continuing debate about how to practice forestry and meet landowners' objectives offers a much wider array of choices for managing any land. I think that the debate has been good for our country. It is not a bad model for other countries.
Now you will find that in most of the developing countries, almost all of their forest land is owned by the state.

West: Do you find now an interest on the part of foreign governments in encouraging private forestry in their nations and getting away from diverting public lands to crop lands?
Sirmon: Yes. I find there is a strong push to help small farmers grow an array of crops on their land along with agriculture. That is mainly supported by the state-level of government in countries like Brazil. There is a strong desire, a strong push, to help the small private landowner.

West: So they don't have the equivalent of a Weyerhaeuser or a Georgia Pacific in the private sector that is involved with forestry on their own lands?
Sirmon: Not really. In Brazil they do have the plantation forests in the south, where one finds the Weyerhaeuser-type industry. But within the Amazon itself this is not the case. There is only one big industrial operation (Jari project) in the Amazon region of Brazil.
In Indonesia, there are very few industrial companies that own their own land. Most of them have concessions from the government to operate on government lands. In fact, Weyerhaeuser, at one time, had a concession in Indonesia.
So we don't have the industrial capability in most other countries like we have here.

West: It is instead a twin track, the individual small holder and then the larger government holdings.
Sirmon: Right.

West: Related to this, after World War II, newly independent nations sold off timber as a quick way of generating income, capital for investment, and government revenues, which led to the depletion of native forests in some places. They were basically impoverished nations. They were looking for quick sources of wealth, and there was this virgin forest out there.
Sirmon: Right.

Ecosystem Management

West: The Forest Service promoted multiple-use in 1960, I believe at the 5th World Forestry Congress. Have we replaced this concept now with an ecosystem management model? Why I bring that up is that, traditionally, forestry in the United States has been practiced as an agricultural tree farm model, the goal being increased productivity to meet a growing demand.

"... you could almost say that ecosystem management in the United States is equivalent to sustainable management internationally."

Are we confusing people overseas now by shifting to ecosystem management? By saying now we want you to establish reserves, we want you to protect the biodiversity. The model is not to produce a monocultural tree stand but instead to preserve many of the elements of the native forest.

Sirmon: No, I haven't experienced that in my dealings. Developing countries that have large populations of indigenous peoples are more in tune with the notion of sustainable development than one might imagine.

What we have done is kind of mixed the notion of ecosystem management with sustainability. In fact, you could almost say that ecosystem management in the United States is equivalent to sustainable management internationally.

Now, there are several industrialized countries interested in ecosystem management because they are facing the same kind of questions from their publics as we are.

Japan, for instance, is very interested in how we implement ecosystem management. They picked up on "new perspectives" (original term for what became known in the Forest Service as "ecosystem management") as soon as we had a publication out. They are tracking ecosystem management and want to learn more. The Japanese forests are not being developed and cut like forests in other parts of the world.

Social Forestry

West: What is the role of social forestry overseas, and does it have applications or utility here within the United States?

Sirmon: Our relationship with the forests in the United States is so different from that of the populations in the tropical world. There are close to a billion people in the world who live daily in or near the forest and get their daily sustenance to a large degree from the forest. They depend on forests for medicine, food, shelter, and cover. We don't have that situation in the United States outside of Alaska, perhaps.

We don't have that intimate personal relationship with the land where we gather our daily sustenance directly from the land. Farming, animal husbandry, and the forest are so much a part of the social structure that one needs to look at the forest in the light of that social structure.

We really can't make the same case that there is a need for social forestry in the United States. We do have policies on community stability, where we try to do things that are in harmony with the local community and will not disrupt or put the social structure in disequilibrium.

We have had some degree of success historically, though; if you look at agriculture, forestry, and mining, they are cyclic. It is hard to harmonize or stabilize economic and social conditions in some small community that has been totally dependent on natural resources for its economic base.

So we could have that kind of comparison with the United States, but it is still quite different in my view.

West: Perhaps the only example of social forestry we practice that would be comparable takes place in northern California in some of the national forests. They are managing some of the vegetation so that Native Americans can use it for basketmaking. That's more a cultural maintenance than it is an economic need.
Sirmon: For instance, we don't take into consideration the fruit and nut trees as a part of forestry in this country. But in other areas, such as central Java, if we are going to practice forestry that meets peoples' needs, it will not be by promoting planting of Douglas-firs or southern pines, it will be by fostering the species needed on a frequent basis by the people who live there.

New Paradigms

West: In a recent talk, you ended by making the remark in an RF&D briefing at the Washington Office on UNCED on July 22, 1992, that Forest Service employees appear to be somewhat unprepared to talk about the broader issues that constitute international forestry, such as global consumption patterns, income distribution, and demographic pressures on natural resources. Is the new direction in forestry schools—now that there is more of this social element in the curriculum—is that preparing, better preparing, foresters today to be international foresters?
Sirmon: I think it is sensitizing rather than preparing. I think the education that has taken place in the last three or four years, partly as a result of the preparation for UNCED, has sensitized many people in the world to look at all aspects of forestry and the larger questions of the role that forests play in society.
When I made that statement, I was referring to the kinds of questions that were being addressed in preparation for UNCED; and I find that our people, generally speaking, on the domestic forestry side would have been ill-prepared to debate many of the issues relating to the role of forests in the world. They would have been ill-prepared to speak with any kind of authority.

"I find that our people ... on the domestic forestry side would have been ill-prepared to debate many of the issues relating to the role of forests in the world."

West: In my discipline, anthropology, we would be ill-prepared to discuss which species of tree should be planted on what type of terrain. It is not a criticism that foresters weren't up to speed on global issues; it just wasn't part of the discipline in the past.
Sirmon: Well, even in a different area, I think our people, certain policy people in both Federal forest management as well as State forest management, ought to be able to talk about the merits and demerits of trade restrictions on tropical woods as they relate to adding value to tropical forests. If you are going to save the forests, they must be made valuable. If there is no value, you're not going to save them. The native forest is going to be destroyed one way or the other if it has no value. The forests must have a value in themselves in order to be of importance for policymakers, and if the forest products cannot be traded in the international market, the forests are not going to have a priority in land-use decisionmaking.

"... if forest products cannot be traded in the international market, the forests are not going to have a priority in land-use decision-making."

Now, there are a number of State legislatures that are being presented with bills restricting the imports of some tropical woods from tropical countries. I think our State foresters as well as some of the (Forest Service) State and Private people ought to be knowledgeable of the consequences of restricting trade of tropical wood.

West: That gets complicated. You try to protect tropical forests by banning imports and you really defeat your purpose by that same act.

Disaster Assistance

West: One area not covered in my essay on international forestry history was disaster assistance. Give me an overview of the program as it relates to your agenda for international forestry.
Sirmon: I think this is one of the weaker areas in terms of our mission within international forestry. I am still in the process of convincing myself that we have much of a role in international disaster assistance, particularly in terms of leadership in disaster assistance. I think there are other entities in our government that are better able to fulfill the U.S. responsibility in disaster assistance.
We are involved in disaster assistance because we have expertise in responding to emergencies and disasters in an organized way. Our continuous need to respond to forest fires has led us to develop a very good organized response system.
It is clear that this model can be used in other disasters, not just fire, but in any disaster. For example, there was a plane crash in 1985 or so here in Washington, DC, near the 14th Street bridge. The response was very disorganized and the Forest Service was called in later to advise on how to organize.
I haven't convinced myself that we should be expanding in this area. I am calling for a review to find a strong justification on why we should be involved in this activity.

West: Past critics have stated that the United States lacked a coherent, integrated forestry development agenda for international forestry development projects, that instead forestry was fragmented with bits distributed in USAID, the Forest Service, the State Department, and even EPA. Comments?
Sirmon: The U.S. Government, including the Forest Service, did not have a coherent policy and approach for international assistance regarding forestry. There was hardly any guidance in the Forest Service Manual regarding international forestry. USAID did not have a strategic planning process for their forestry. In fact, they seldom thought in terms of forestry in carrying out their programs. Their overall objectives were economic assistance, and they would funnel money into various sectors, hoping to increase the economic conditions in a country, and if a forestry project helped in this regard, then it was just one of those features of the overall project. It did not have a forestry objective within itself.

"There was hardly any guidance in the Forest Service Manual regarding international forestry."

It is my feeling that the Forestry Support Program was aimed more at normalizing and regulating the year-to-year business that the Forest Service could give USAID in the design of projects. It did not stem from a basic policy and desire on the part of the Forest Service to achieve forestry objectives. This is not to say that the program has not achieved some good results, but the driving factors seem to have been prompted more by the need for predicting workloads than from the need to achieve forestry goals. One of the first policy decisions I proposed after the Deputy area was set up was that there be a strategic planning capability applied to International Forestry and that the Resources Planning Act have an international component. Furthermore, I still expect the Solomon's Group to help the Forest Service prepare this international component of the 1995 RPA. It was my hope that USAID and the State Department would see in this effort the need and desire for strategic planning on their parts and also a mechanism that they might adopt.

USAID and Forestry

West: When the proposal was made to create International Forestry, USAID was concerned that the Forest Service would act only on its traditional strengths, which were mainly in the technical area, and larger strategic concerns would not be addressed. Were you aware of USAID's concerns?

Sirmon: Yes. USAID does not really know what goes on in the Forest Service. They need to have a better understanding of some of our social programs, such as Job Corps and Older Americans. We are into recreation in a big way, and can manage wilderness, monuments, wild and scenic rivers, and other special areas. We have a long history in reclamation, grazing, mining, and many other activities. They are not very appreciative of what it takes to be successful in managing a multiple-use operation in a democracy where we have to share power with the public.

We should be offering services in the international arena, where we have a comparative advantage. We offer our assistance where the Forest Service is as good or better than anyone else in the United States. There are some specific areas where we can make this claim. Few organizations manage an area as large as the national forests, that in itself is a strength. We manage for multiple use in a diverse society in a democratic setting where we share powers and where we have a lot of public involvement. No private organizations can match this experience.

We produce over 40,000 environmental assessments every year on projects and programs—probably more than any other agency in the government. We have been on the leading edge of the evolving environmental law. In the area of environmental assessments, we have a unique strength.

Another strength is that of convening the public to deal with natural resources issues. I think we have had more experience than most organizations in bringing divergent elements into a forum.

The administrative arrangements (management system) the Forest Service developed to manage an organization of 35,000 to 50,000 people in a decentralized way is another strength.

Research and extension (State and Private) are other specific areas of expertise and experience within the Forest Service.

West: Other staffs, other parts of the Forest Service are involved with the international forestry program...
Sirmon: Right.

West: ...including recreation, wildlife management.
Sirmon: And not only those staffs, but we can also draw from our social programs, such as Job Corps. We operate 18 Job Corps Centers, where we have close to 10,000 young adults—whatever the number is—24 hours a day, 365 days a year, and not only educating them but giving them skills. The job placement rate of Job Corps graduates is higher than for many universities.

West: When I look at the projects that have been authorized in international forestry overseas, it seems most of them had to deal with trees in one form or another. But you are saying that there are opportunities in recreation, in wildlife management that International Forestry is involved in doing overseas. I wondered if you have any examples, or is that still in the future?
Sirmon: It's not in the future! I will give you some examples other than trees. We are getting involved in the neotropical birds program, we are pairing one of our forests that shares the same birds with a forest in Central America and South America.
Most of the neotropical bird populations are on a downward trend. We don't know whether this is because of their summer habitat or their winter habitat or problems along the migratory route.
Another example is in Brazil. We are working to help them develop environmental assessment procedures and model state laws for environmental protection.
In Venezuela, we have assigned a person for 2 years to help reclaim some of the devastated gold mining areas. One feature will be to help the Venezuelans set up a system of mining cooperatives that can raise capital to buy the equipment needed in order to do a better job of mining and to reduce mercury dumping in the streams.

"Some of the policy people and leaders in some of the developing countries are much afraid of NGOs."

Nongovernmental Organizations (NGOs)

West: Describe the role of the NGOs in world forestry efforts.
Sirmon: Some of these NGOs have pointed out situations that needed attention and were being ignored. You can't put all the NGOs in one category. You have the early-alert, attention-getting type groups like Earth First!, which take drastic action to get attention. Then you have some that are more moderate and try to come up with solutions.
The concept of NGOs is being expanded to developing countries. Some of the policy people and leaders in some of the developing countries are much afraid of NGOs.
Some NGOs bypass bureaucracies to get information about what is happening to the resources. They are often perceived [by developing countries] as a threat to the bureaucracies.

I have been told by policy people in one developing country that "the Forest Service is welcome in our country; in fact, we want you here, but don't bring your American NGOs." The style and manner of some of our NGOs within the United States would not be acceptable in many developing countries.
In fact, during the preparation for the UNCED Conference, some of our NGOs wanted to be a part of the negotiations. They found, however, they would have had to change the style and approach that they had used domestically, or they would be ignored.
You can't be a player in the international arena unless you recognize that people and the needs of the people are to be considered. Beating policymakers over the head with bad examples will not work.
The NGOs that were a part of the PrepCon process made valuable contributions, and they also gained a great deal of insight and maturity during these negotiation sessions. They are now advising their people who deal internationally to go about their work in a different way.
There is a role for NGOs in developing countries. We have joined hands with some of our domestic NGOs in some international work. We have some joint projects through organizations such as the World Wildlife Fund, The Nature Conservancy, and others.

West: Any further thoughts or comments on NGOs?
Sirmon: My experience in working with NGOs has been both frustrating and rewarding. Frustrating in that some of the NGOs wanted me or the agency to change our way of doing business and resorted to tactics that frustrated the execution of our work. In looking back, however, the message the NGOs were trying to tell the rest of the world and the direction they were trying to set, by and large, has been the right direction. Some of the changes we've made in environmental protection have come about more rapidly than had we been allowed to seek the changes on our own. The environmental NGOs should not all be painted with the same brush. There are certain groups within the NGO community whose mission is to sound an early alarm. There are others whose major mission is more educational. I think there is a very important and substantial role NGOs can play in developing countries as well as some developed countries, that is to bring to the attention of policymakers and the public the need for change and the elements that need to be implemented to achieve that change.
No, I don't think NGOs lack the background to make good forestry proposals. Most NGOs are made up of a wide range of skills and can bring those skills to bear on whatever subject they are addressing. I think sometimes they deliberately seek to gain a great deal more than they expect they will ever get, predicting that in the end they will have to compromise. This tends to hurt their credibility.
I don't think it is inappropriate for NGOs to bypass the state and work directly on projects with local groups and on local projects. In many cases, the bureaucratic delay would be such that they [NGOs] would lose their impact and would not achieve the objective of alerting the communities of interest to their message.

Forest Products Laboratory

West: Let me get back to a few specific questions here. What is the relationship between international forestry and the Forest Products Laboratory? Years ago, the FPL complained to me they were getting foreign visitors there that had not been coordinated with the Washington Office. Does this continue to be a problem?
Sirmon: No, I don't think so. We have a very good process of identifying the capability of the lab and what the lab wants to do, and of securing people from other countries to take advantage of some of the opportunities at the lab.
The lab is part of Research. You know that international forestry used to be a part of Research. Right now, we have a very close relationship with the lab in project planning, program planning, priority setting, and we furnish money to the lab to help achieve some of our objectives.

West: Outsiders may not be aware of the whole role of the Forest Products Laboratory as it relates to international forestry. As early as 1918, Eloise Garry, on the staff there, was doing analysis of tropical hardwood samples that were sent from overseas. So they have always been involved with tropical forestry research.
Sirmon: They still have the basic programs of wood technology and wood structures, and that sort of thing. We are probably able to identify more places where they can make a contribution than in the past.
The lab can help expand the use of wood by reducing waste, by finding better drying methods, sawing methods, and sawing technology. By doing this, we can reduce the amount of waste that is occurring throughout the world.

FRM II

West: Explain the USAID Forest Resources Management Project (FRM II) and its relation to International Forestry and the Forest Service.
Sirmon: In 1980, we entered into a 10-year contract with USAID to furnish forestry expertise to help assess and plan forestry projects. In 1990, we entered into another 10-year contract called "FRM II" for another 10 years for about $45 million over the 10-year period.
We also brought in the Peace Corps and are making them a player and a partner along with USAID and the Forest Service in carrying out this program.

West: Elaborate a bit about how International Forestry is integrating the work of the Peace Corps, USAID, and the Forest Service.
Sirmon: For the last 12 years, the Forest Service has had a long-term contract with USAID to provide them with the skills necessary to plan and design forestry projects in their regional bureaus. USAID has viewed this contract as giving them the right and the authority to select individuals and claim these individuals as their own while the individuals are still a part of the Forest

Service organization. This has led to a situation where the people working on the USAID contract were viewed as USAID people within the Forest Service organization, and the Forest Service could not make any demands on them that were not part of the USAID contract. The new concept in our reorganization is to provide the services to USAID without reflecting a specific organizational structure. This has been done because we find ourselves servicing a number of clients in addition to USAID, such as the Tropical Forestry Program, the U.S.-Asia Environmental Partnership, the Peace Corps, direct bilateral cooperation, and other situations where it is more advantageous to have our people available to all these customers rather than being dedicated to just one. We have not been in this new configuration long enough to know exactly how it is going to work out, and the current freeze on filling positions is hurting our ability to deliver at this point.

From Fund to Function

West: Explain the transition in international forestry from funding-source driven to function driven.

Sirmon: Previously the International Forestry organization was organized around funding sources. Our new organization structure is organized around function, and we can serve any customer based on appropriate skill rather than funding source. We are still in transition and have yet to prove the success of this concept. What we are talking about here is not organizing our unit to reflect where funds come from, which has been a pattern in the past. We had a small group of people called Disaster Assistance, located discreetly as one small unit in International Forestry. We had another unit that dealt with the Forestry Support Program, which is FRM II, to support USAID, and the employees in that small group were funded by USAID. Then we had another small group of people carrying out the Tropical Forestry Program, and funding came directly from the Congress.

"We had a pattern of setting up small entities within our organization that reflected the source funds."

We had a pattern of setting up small entities within our organization that reflected the source funds. When we started expanding our partnerships and looking for additional funding sources, it was no longer practical to have individual units for every funding source, because doing so would be inefficient and result in duplicate efforts. In light of our new expanded mission as well as a need to organize along functional lines and not funding lines, we reorganized; and this is represented in the new proposed organizational structure that we are waiting for the Secretary to approve.

USAID took time to adjust to these changes. They liked having "their" person in the Forest Service whom they could hold responsible. They didn't want "their" person called to work on non-USAID projects.

We took our organizational proposal to them and sat down with key personnel, including some of their policy people, and explained the merits of our new organization, and they finally agreed.

Ironically, we got caught up in the transition of Presidential administrations and a freeze on hiring. We have had 2 or 3 key positions that are supposed to be servicing USAID, among others, and these positions have been frozen. I can't fill them, and USAID is now saying, "Aha! we told you it wouldn't work."

Well, as it so happens, yesterday (June 16, 1993), the Secretary of Agriculture approved 4 positions. Really, I think the first 4 (new hires) in all the Forest Service, and so we will be making offers to fill those jobs quickly.

Critical Needs

West: What are the most urgent help needs from other nations in regard to international forestry? As you travel around, what do people there identify as critical needs, urgent needs today, that they want you to help them with?
Sirmon: Well, usually, when we sit down and start talking about ways that we can collaborate, they immediately identify their present problem of the day, particularly a problem that is in the spotlight.
For instance, when the Minister of Forestry from Indonesia was here 2 years ago, the public was on his back, unmercifully, because of forest fires. Smoke was pouring in over the island of Java from Kalimantan, and the Minister was saying, "We don't have any forest fires."
He had fires going he couldn't put out, and he was really caught, and he said, "I've got to find a way to get on top of fire suppression and fire prevention, and I need a Smokey Bear for Indonesia. I need some of your airplanes to drop chemicals."
Although he also has some immediate needs, a little bit further back on the burner, he said, "We want to change our concession program with the concessionaires, because we are getting criticized, and it is not efficient. We want to change, but that is a longer-term program." They come to us with short-term needs and then they talk about the long-term objectives.
Same thing in Brazil. We went to Brazil, and they had a large fire in the national park, and the public was demanding that the forestry organization get more efficient. We got in the door in firefighting and reforestation and those kinds of things, but once in the door, started to develop creditability, and started to work on the broader, long-range strategy of strengthening the institutions.

West: How do we get to the point where you have this capability? How do you get to the point where you can do these things? So then you can start getting into policy, organizational structure, political support, and regulations and enforcement—all these things. Certainly, based on our own history, because in the early days of the agency, after 1905, that was one of the first public tests of the value of the Forest Service was: Could we put out fires? After we had done that, then we had credibility and...
Sirmon: Yes, we stopped timber theft, we dramatically reduced areas burned by fire, and we gained control of grazing.

Support for International Forestry

West: If you were out there on a district or forest or station, what would you say to employees about how they can relate to the mission of International Forestry? How can they identify with it?

"Why do they need to spend this money overseas?"

Sirmon: Let me preface my answer by saying that all the people in the Forest Service aren't of one mind or of one level of understanding about what is going on. But there are quite a number of people in the Forest Service who are aware of the problems internationally in forestry, and who want to help.

We have a large number of people who have served either in the Peace Corps or as missionaries or on some other international assignment—people who have a natural inclination and desire to work internationally. We also have a group of people who don't know much about what is going on and don't care much about what is going on and who have pressing local needs, and wonder why we are spending the money on international problems.

It just so happens that I have a briefing this afternoon for Congressman Ralph Regula (R-OH), who is the Minority member of the House Subcommittee on Appropriations for Interior. In a way he is asking the same question, along with Senator Don Nickles from Oklahoma, who is the most conservative member in the Senate—not just on the Committee, but in the Senate—who says, "What does this do for the people of Oklahoma? Why do they need to spend this money overseas?"

What I would do is give a very brief overview of why it is important to pay attention to what is going on in the forests of the world; and why the misuse of the forests of the world would not be advantageous to us domestically; and I would talk about the global commons—the oceans, the atmosphere, the ozone layer, the need to maintain biodiversity, potential sources of food and medicine—and that no nation is an island unto itself.

If we are going to maintain the quality of life in this country, the conditions of the forests in the world have some bearing on our situation. Also a need to protect our own domestic forests from a disease or a pest that is going to be transported into this country at some point in time.

I'd start out by making it a matter of self-interest. Then I would point out places in which we could help, and I would link that to the comparative strengths, the comparative advantage that the Forest Service has.

I would make the point that if the Forest Service isn't helping make these decisions, someone else is going to make them, and they may prescribe solutions that are much less efficient or appropriate than what is needed.

West: It is a perennial question in terms of foreign aid from conservative Congressmen about what is the benefit. As we redefine what we mean by national security in the aftermath of the Cold War, as you mentioned in our previous interview, population pressure, pollution, trade issues are coming to the fore. So it is self-interest, if you want to get pragmatic about it.

Sirmon: Right. I think the realization that there is a need to be concerned about environmental security and food security has greatly heightened in the last 10 years.

Now that the focus is not solely on military security, with the demise of the Soviet Union and other threats, and with the ability to measure the human impact on systems of the world and realize that we are destroying some of our environmental systems, there is certainly a realization now that American security might be threatened by

environmental conditions in other countries. Therefore, from our own selfish interest, if we want the quality-of-life values to be protected, it is worth something to us to prevent harmful activities in other places of the world.

Downsizing

West: Has the personnel and budget downsizing that is going on now in all Federal agencies and in the Forest Service affected the International Forestry mission?
Sirmon: No. The downsizing won't affect the mission. It hasn't affected the mission. We are doing our part to try to accommodate people who are losing their jobs or who are trying to find new skills.
The reason for downsizing is affecting how we carry out our mission. A lot of the reason for downsizing is the need to protect biodiversity and the need to maintain viable populations, and protect certain endangered species.
The way we have handled that [downsizing] is being portrayed in some places internationally as, "If the United States is not on top of their problems, why should they be in the international arena." This is a message that we have to try to overcome in carrying out our international mission and in getting the right credentials.

West: I was thinking of the problem, the whole problem of the Federal deficit, but that's a valid issue that you raised in terms of just our own internal situation as far as our overseas image.
Sirmon: Right.

West: The Forest Service...
Sirmon: Let me add, the deficit is having some effect. Although President Bush called for an immediate increase of $150 million to help forestry internationally, the Congress has been reluctant to appropriate the funds. I think we have covered that at some other time.

West: Right.
Sirmon: Frankly, the Forest Service is not prepared to efficiently spend $150 million at this time. It may be that the competition for funds will mean that we will get much less than $30 million. I am getting very good signals now that we are going to get somewhere between $10 million and $30 million for international forestry. That is a logical level. I don't see us getting to where we are a donor agency, where we pass out money. We need to stick to our mission.

When the appropriations process ran its course, there were no funds for "Forests for the Future" in the Forest Service budget. The pressures to control Federal spending were so great that new initiatives in the international arena had little chance of success. Furthermore, the record midwest floods and the increased funding needs to implement the President's Pacific Northwest Forest Plan took much higher priority in the Interior Appropriations Committee than international needs.