

Profiles in Forestry: John Twitchell, Colorado State Forest Service

John Twitchell is Steamboat District forester with the Colorado State Forest Service. He is one of five professional foresters responsible for managing state and private lands in an 8,600-square-mile area that includes the 72,000-acre Colorado State Forest. He also works to provide wildfire grant assistance to local fire departments and communities, forest management assistance to private landowners and local governments, and forestry education and information outreach.



When did you become interested in forestry?

I always loved spending time in the woods. As a child, I was the one turning over the rocks and rotten logs to see what lived underneath. I have to admit I was not clear about exactly what a forester did when I enrolled at the University of New Hampshire, but I knew it involved being paid to be out in the woods. College not only taught me the fundamentals of my profession, but instilled a passion for forestry that continues to grow.

How did you get where you are today?

I've had a fairly nonlinear career path. I developed a love of applied forestry when I started working in the woods during college. I did timber stand improvement, firewood cutting, and horse logging.

After graduating with a degree in forest management, I worked both in private consulting and logging. I eventually worked for the state of New Hampshire. I managed Pisgah State Park, one of the state's largest forested parks, and later moved to a staff position working on forestry, recreation, and natural resource issues across the state.

I moved to Colorado in 1995 to pursue educational opportunities. I was on a leave of absence from my position in New Hampshire, but fell in love with the mountains of Northern Colorado and decided to stay in the West. I started working for the Colorado State Forest Service in 1998. I managed the forest resources on the Colorado State Forest, a 72,000-acre gem in the mountains west of Fort Collins with a very active forest management program. Recently, I became the district forester for the counties of Northwest Colorado.

What's a typical day for you?

One of the great things about my job is that I seldom find myself doing the same thing day after day. On any given day, I may help prepare management plans for state and private lands, prepare and administer timber sales and other forestry operations, fight wildfire, conduct controlled burns, perform forest inventory, assist communities in wildfire mitigation and preparation, and keep our staff busy and happy. There is a certain seasonality to some activities, but they never become routine.

What knowledge and skills are essential for your job?

According to John Twitchell, among the skills necessary for a successful career are a sound and well-rounded field forestry background, possessing the credibility to represent forestry interests to the public, and staying current with the latest information and technology.

Having a sound and well-rounded field forestry background is important in accomplishing the mechanics of my job. It is also important in providing the credibility to represent forestry interests to the public. Staying current and competent with technology also is very important to me. Finally, managing people is probably my most important and most difficult responsibility.

What is the biggest challenge associated with your position?

Colorado and other states in the Rocky Mountain West are experiencing significant changes to their forest landscapes due to insects, disease, and drought. Tree mortality from the current mountain pine beetle infestation is unprecedented in Colorado's recorded history. The dead, dry fuels resulting from beetle-killed trees pose a wildfire threat to mountain homes, communities, and economies that depend on recreation and tourism. The current epidemic also poses a serious and costly threat to watersheds that provide water to Colorado communities as well as adjoining states.

It is both a great opportunity and a great challenge to be a forester in these times. It inescapably puts additional demands on all facets of my job. My greatest challenge is balancing these disparate demands to my satisfaction.

What keeps you motivated?

Forestry is one of those professions that engenders great passion in people. I have a passion for forests and forestry and I also enjoy the service part of my job. There is good deal of satisfaction in helping people and contributing to my community. Finally, it's exciting to go back and see the results of some of my previous forestry work. There are young trees growing in those harvest areas. I may not be around to see those trees when they are mature, but my children and grandchildren will.

What advice would you give to new or young foresters?

It is important to get your hands dirty early in your career. Whether you end up marking timber sales or setting policy in Washington, practical experience goes a long way. The irony of our profession is that, as you advance in your career, your work can take you further away from the resource that attracted you to the profession in the first place. I'm fortunate that I still spend almost as much time in the field as I do in the office or at meetings.

The other reason some practical experience is important is the dilemma our modern technology presents us. We have wonderful tools that can help us make better management decisions. But they can also distance us from the resource. At the end of the day, our management actions are real, not virtual.

Has SAF membership benefited your career? If so, how?

I've always felt I've gotten more out of the SAF than I've given. I can't imagine not being a member of my professional society. When I was in the private sector, I felt my SAF membership gave me professional credibility, particularly in the absence of forester licensing. Working for the state, my membership in the SAF allows me to network with my colleagues in the federal and private sectors. These interactions tend to help me in my job as we work on common agendas. Over the years, my SAF membership has shown prospective employers that I'm serious about staying current with my profession and contributing beyond the confines of the job.