

INTERVIEW WITH LARRY DEBATES
BY MARK MADISON, MAY 1, 2004
RETIRED USFWS EMPLOYEE REUNION
NCTC, SHEPHERDSTOWN, WEST VIRGINIA

DR. MADISON: Why don't we start out Larry with the spelling of your name and your birth date? The easiest questions are first.

MR. DEBATES: It's actually Lawrence, but Larry is what I've gone by. I was born December 18, 1931. After finishing high school I enlisted in the U.S. Navy on January 8, 1951. I was discharged from the Navy in the fall of 1954 to start college at South Dakota State University. I met my future wife Greta Houtman at the University where she was in the Pharmacy School. I was pursuing a degree in Fish and Wildlife Management. We both graduated in 1959 and were married in 1960. I went to work for the State of South Dakota Game Fish and Park as a summer intern while in school and then as a full-time employee after graduation in 1959. Then in August 1961 I took my first job with the USFWS as an Assistant Refuge Manager at Lower Souris NWR. It is now the J. Clark Salyer NWR.

And like many wives of FWS employees, my wife Greta was my wonderful supporting partner throughout my career. Any successes I had were because of that support and sacrifice on her part. She practiced as a Pharmacist in many different places as I moved many times pursuing my career in the fish and wildlife profession. During these early years of our marriage she also took on the role of mother. Because we moved so often, our three daughters were born in three different places. Our eldest, Kari, was born in Aberdeen, South Dakota in 1961. The second, Renae, was born in Wishek, North Dakota in 1962. And the youngest, was born in Fergus Falls, Minnesota in 1966. This is probably not unique to my family, but many times our spouses' sacrifices and their contributions are not fully recognized as an important part of a successful career in the USFWS. In my particular case, my wife and family were the most important part of making my career a success.

DR. MADISON: The next question is your education and how you came to the USFWS?

MR. DEBATES: I went into the military for four years before I went to college. I came back and went to South Dakota State University. I quit for a short period of time and went out to California and worked so I could get out of debt. I came back and finished in April of 1959. Then I went to work for the State of South Dakota. I worked there for about two and a half years. I had done some summer work with them too. I had about three and a half years with South Dakota. Then, I was in Webster, South Dakota after having been in about three different places with them. Harvey Nelson, who I think that then the Deputy in Refuges in the Minneapolis regional office. He came out and talked to

me and asked me how I'd like to go to work with the USFWS. I told him that I'd really like to work in wetlands. We were working a lot in wetlands already in South Dakota. I told him that I'd like to see if I could it, and to see if I could stay right in the state. Harvey said, "Well, we'd like to have you go to Refuges first". This was so I could get indoctrinated there. He then said, "We've got a position up at Lower Souris Refuge and we'll put you up there." The FWS was kind of shaking out the national wetlands program. I had been involved in the State program for quite a while. That was in 1961. He told me that I would stay up there for a while but, "Then we're going to be developing some strategies on protection of wetlands in the Dakotas, and we'll get you back into wetland work, if everything works out". I went to Lower Souris, which is now the J. Clark Salyer Refuge. Ed Smith was the Manager there. I was a Biologist. My title was Assistant Refuge Manager, but I worked with Merle Hammond quite a bit because he was a really noted biologist in the FWS. I also worked with the Refuge people. I stayed there for about six months. Then they put me down in [sic] Wishek, North Dakota. I delineated wetlands there for a couple of years. We picked out the wetlands that we thought ought to be protected. Then, Jim Gillette and Ed Crosier, there was a whole crew of us down there who all had areas that we worked on. When we finished that we were going to take over and manage the wetlands. As things go, the wetlands program didn't move quite as fast, so they were going to have to move some of us to other places. I was married by then and had two children. I was getting a little nervous about just not knowing where I was going. That's one of the other reasons I left working with the State of South Dakota. I liked the work there, but they didn't have medical insurance or life insurance and after you get married, that's pretty important. I just got a little nervous and I decided to go and see if I could get in to some more wetland work. I went into River Basins then. River Basin had a wetlands aspect in it. I went to Aberdeen, South Dakota where I had working with the State. Milt Reese was the Supervisor there. I was there for a couple of years and they moved me to Fergus Falls. I worked in wetland there. Then I went in to the Regional Office and supervised the Biologists in the prairie who were working on the wetlands program. Then, they were setting up Denver as a new Region. We were kind of uncertain as to who was going to end up in certain places. Ed Smith had since moved on from the refuge to being the Supervisor of Refuges in Region 1 in Portland. Phil Morgan had been his deputy out there. I had been out of Refuges. One thing is that Forest Carpenter was a pretty parochial kind of guy. When I first hired in to Refuges; I think they kind of expected that once you were in Refuges, you stay there! Well, I moved back in to River Basins, so when Ed said that maybe he should move me back in to Refuges and have me as his Deputy, there was a little bit of resistance in Refuges. Eventually, I went out there in 1973 in January. I was his Deputy replacing Phil Morgan who had just left and went out to Atlanta. I served in that function until he...well, then the Area Offices came into being. I was one of the first Assistant Regional Directors that they hired under the Area Offices. That's when they had the Area Manager selected, and Lynn was the Director. They got the ARD positions filled before the Area Office, so we still functioned in sort of the old way. We supervised refuges out of the Regional Office. When Area Offices came in, I went out there and came back again.

I was still in that position. I served in that position I think, from 1976 when Lynn put me in until 1988. I had twelve years there. For the last year, I was working on waterfowl stuff, but it was in Central Valley, California. I spent a brief amount of time in Wildlife Services too, in Minneapolis. I had three divisions that I had worked in, so I had some experience. I probably wasn't the best Biologist in the world because you lose that capability pretty quick. I knew wetlands pretty well. Then I got in to administration, and like those people this morning pointed out, we didn't have too many skilled administrators. Maybe I was a better administrator than I was a biologist, but that's what...we set out to do some things in Refuges in Region 1 and we made some changes. It was Ed and I to start out with and later it was with some of the RDs. After a time, I eventually started the first North American joint venture in California as kind of a collateral duty. I was doing that along with being the ARW for Wildlife. That's when I was back for my mother-in-law's funeral and found out...Wally Stupki called me and said that the Director had called him and told him that Rolf Wallenstrom had been terminated because he didn't take the move that they were giving him. Dave Riley had been stripped of his responsibilities. He was the ARD for Ecological Services for River Basins, I guess, at that time. I think it was Eco-Service then. I was reassigned from my job to be assistant to him by Dunkle. I'd be in charge of the North American waterfowl planning in the Pacific Region. It was just really punitive is what it was. My understanding was, and I am not sure I am correct on that, but John Doebel had worked for me before. He was a good employee and he had gone to Washington, D. C. and he came back. When he was in Washington, I think Bill Horne who was the Assistant Secretary at the time...there was some work to be done in Alaska that some of the Alaskan people weren't comfortable with. It was a land exchange or something. I'm not sure this is all factual, but this is the way I recall it. Bill Horne told John that he'd like to have him go and work on that project. John was a doer, so he went up there and worked on it. I think Bill promised him that when he was done with it, and had done a good job, he would be placed in a new position. I think John wanted the job I was in. I still wasn't out of there. If they'd have talked to me and let me know, "we'd like to do this, and we'd like for you to work with John and make it an easy transition"...

But instead, when I got back from my mother-in-law's funeral John was sitting at my desk and it made it uncomfortable for him, and for me, and the staff. So I ran around and tried to find a new office and stuff. We started to fight back. They had the Government Accountability Office in Washington, D. C. They kind of oversee the government. They came out and interviewed us. Eventually, I think they had some hearings at the GAO. They kind of saw that there were some things going on in the FWS. They were creating positions that weren't really positions but they were trying to put people aside. It was costing money. I think that might have been part of the demise of Dunkle. They reassigned him. They took him out of the Director's job and sent him to OBS in Colorado. Then John Turner came in. I think that was right after President Bush [President George H. W. Bush] got in. John Turner kind of put us back onto more of an even keel. By that time, I think OPM ruled that he had to reinstate Rolf. Turner wrote me a kind of a letter of apology for the way they handled the situation. That made me

feel better, but I think it made...that's the way a lot of people were treated as they got towards the end of their career. They kind of jerked them around and didn't treat them the way they should have been; with a little dignity. I see that they are still making that mistake. I worked for one year, while this appeal was going on at the North American Waterfowl Plan. I got it up and running and it's been very successful. I was invited back to the ten-year anniversary in 1996. It's really going good, so I felt really good about that. Some of the things that I felt good about after I had worked on them...we did a lot of things, and turned around the use on some of the refuges out in our region. They had kind of gotten away from the primary purpose of managing a refuge. They had water skiing going on in some of the area of Ruby Lake where we had some of the best waterfowl production, especially Red Heads. We finally got that turned around. It took awhile, and it wasn't just me. You had to have the RDs. Kahler Martinson when we started that. Of course I knew Kahler from college. I was there in Portland about nine months ahead of him. We turned something around on Ruby Lake. We also got control of the cattle management on Malheur NWR, which was pretty that was pretty much in the hands of ranchers. There are a number of things that we did on refuges. We also tried to upgrade, a little bit, the quality of some of our managers. Some of them just needed some improvements and you can't blame it all on them. It was the way they were managed; just kind of let them manage the refuges in the field like they wanted to. We did initiate some of the things in California that were unique. We established an easement program on wetlands in California. That had never been done before. We kind of picked that idea up from the Prairies. They used it for production habitat. We picked it up and used the same concept out there for wintering habitat. We had a lot of resistance to start out with, but it really has worked out well. It's not a perfect program, but better that sitting and watching it disappear. A lot of times it was the hunting clubs and the like who still had the good wetlands. Some would say, "Why do you agree about that?" A lot of times, what was happening was that these old time hunters that were really dedicated to the waterfowl and hunting were either dying or leaving. What we were finding was that some of the kids didn't have that same feeling. So even if it had been a waterfowl club for years, it was not guaranteed. A lot of these old guys really had a strong feeling about that wetlands, so they kind liked the idea that maybe even after they were gone that wetland was going to be there. We got a number of areas where we got the easement program going and it was really successful. That fit right in with the North American Waterfowl Plan.

DR. MADISON: Why don't you tell me about that, since you were there?

MR. DEBATES: Okay, the North American Waterfowl Plan first came into being, and Harvey Nelson was kind of the overseer of that out of Washington, D.C. They wanted to get up one pilot program to see [how it would go]. Bob Streeter was in there too. They picked the Central Valley of California. It was a new approach to doing business. We established the committee, on the ground. We had the Audubon Society, the Defenders of Wildlife, California Fish and Game, the California Waterfowl Association. There were a

number of groups who had actually in the past been our critics. We put them together, and I kind of chaired those meetings. I had a good Biologist named Dick Bower who was very good technically. Mike Miller had put together a concept plan on the wetlands that were valuable. Then we went in with this group and developed some strategies to make sure we protect those wetlands long after we are gone. We sat down, and I think we wrote out about six major objectives to keep the focus. All of these guys had a lot of differences of opinion. The Defenders of Wildlife were not in our camp, but they knew that this was a key issue, even to their values. We tried to stress that we were not doing this just for waterfowl. We worked on that as a committee, to find the objective. Then we started to try and implement them. I remember some of those objectives. We had a lot of discussion as to whether or not some of them were real or aren't they. Some thought we'd never get the Central Valley Project reauthorized. It was an irrigation project and we didn't have any guaranteed water supply for our refuges. We were just doing it with water that was return flow irrigation water. It was getting tougher and tougher. But we put in it there as a goal. There was one guy who was very astute in the political arena. He was with the California Waterfowl Association. His name was Dan Chapin. He had really worked the California legislature and he knew how to work with the legislators. He really got a lot of stuff done in California. After I left, I heard that he had actually gotten Senator Bradley out to conduct a hearing on the reauthorization of the Central Valley Water Project. That was almost unheard of, but eventually, it happened. Eventually, they got some firm water supplies for refuges, and also for some in stream flows. That was after I was gone. I didn't have anything to do with that, but I think that the fact that we put that in the objectives and gave them something to really work on, it really focused them. That was the best accomplishment to me, in the Central Valley. Of course the easement thing was a tool used. There were some new acquisitions and the fee too. One of the major objectives was to get the rice growers to leave some of that stuff out there in the fall of the year. We were in an adversarial relationship with the rice growers. I went back in 1996, they had that celebration of the ten-year plan, and there were 400 and some people there. There were rice growers and all kinds of people who had come together to work on a common objective; The North American Waterfowl Plan. It was rewarding to me. Recently I went to the North American Wildlife Conference in Spokane. The thing that really impressed me was how many joint ventures there are going on now, throughout the United States. They are incorporated into the flyway management. There is a lot of support. And the political situation is favorable because it gives the politicians something to spend money on in their own areas. They can do it. It's kind of a Senator Byrd concept. If you give them something that they can do for you, they are willing to help. From what I understand from talking at the Wildlife Conference, most of the funding for the North American is pretty good. It's primarily because you've got that broad political support.

DR. MADISON: You've done a good job.

MR. DEBATES: Well, somebody has done a good job. The O and M part is still a problem. There is still not that kind of support, not just for North American but also for the entire Service. The Migratory Bird Program has been short changed. They are in bad trouble; the flyways and stuff. They don't have enough money. It was gratifying to me to see all of the North American plans, and they are just about all throughout the United States now. They are also in Canada. We were working with Canadians too. I think that's been a successful program. I had a part in it, but we had some good technical people that helped guide us and made sure we had the right things to work on. Then we had some good people following up to implement it. It wasn't just the FWS people. It had good representation and cooperation. I think really showed what you can do if you work together, and that was an accomplishment. So anyway, that was kind of a good final project for me to be on. I probably would have stayed on a little bit longer, but when you get in an adversarial relationship with your own organization, you kind of get, well, people are a little bit cautious of you. I shouldn't necessarily say 'cautious' of you so much, but the mid-career people are nervous. They can wonder if that is going to hit me? Is that going to happen to me? So I think I lost some credibility with some of the administrators; not so much with the troops. I think the troops liked that somebody stood up and talked back to somebody who they didn't think was doing a good job. I served under five RDs in Region 1. I went there with John Finley, and Kahler Martinson came. Then there was Dick Myshak and the last one I worked directly under was Rolf Wallenstrom. Then Plenert came in while I was on the North American Waterfowl Plan. There was more and more politics getting involved, each year that I was in the FWS. One of my former bosses, Ed Smith, was very experienced. He told me that the big change that occurred in the FWS while he was there; and it continued to go that way, was back when we used to be able to stand up to management when somebody wanted to say something. Politically, if we had a good case, we could go back and it was non-biased. Ed said that changed a great deal when they started adding a lot of staff at the Assistant Secretary level. He said that back then, they used to only have one or two guys over at the Assistant Secretary's office.

DR. MADISON: That wasn't that long ago.

MR. DEBATES: He also said that when you sent something back to the FWS, it was usually your Director and key staff people who have you that kind of support. He said that all of a sudden, most things that were controversial headed right up to the Assistant Secretary's office. I think that has continued to grow. I don't know what the staffing there is like now. But then, the other thing they used to do was to bring people up from the Service to work up there. This was fine, but still, they just got more into the management of your business than you really needed them in.

DR. MADISON: Were there other changes that you observed in the Service? You had a pretty long tenure.

MR. DEBATES: For one thing, when we first started we were pretty much fish and wildlife. The Endangered Species Act came in 1973, or whatever, and the National Environment Policy Act came in. Both of those things changed the way we did business. The laws that came in on the archeological side, and the Administrative Act, and all of those things changed things. It was no longer manage your own refuge, dig your own dikes and that stuff. You had to go through a lot of the same hoops that we wanted other people to go through. So it was a different way of doing business. We had to hire people who worked on impact statements. We had to have people with that skill; not just reviewing them but writing them too. We had to have archeologists to look at the archeological stuff. You couldn't just go out and start moving dirt until that was done. The Administrative Act made it so we had to make sure we did a much better job of going through and making sure we involved people in the right decision making process. It was pretty simple when I first started in the profession, but it got more complex. I think today, I've been out for a long time, but I think it's even more difficult. Now there are just so many things that you've got to make sure you go through the right hoops. From and outfit that used to drive around, and if they saw some predators, or saw some burrows or whatever on the refuge that were doing damage, why, they shot them. They didn't tell anybody about it. But those days are gone forever. We just managed with a lot more freedom. I think the other thing that changed an awful lot was that we never got in the legal arena as much as we began to do towards the end of my career, and even more so now. We did have a little bit of that at the end of my career. I had oversight, along with Rolf Wallenstrom on the Spotted Owl issue. I had worked on an inter-agency committee on that with BLM, the Forest Service, SCS, and everything. We knew that this was a real problem. We had a subcommittee on the Spotted Owl that was essentially made up of all the biologists from all of these agencies. They just told us that this was headed for extinction if you don't do anything about it. It was associated with old growth, but it was as indicator of species. We tried through that inter-agency, or at least I did, in getting BLM and Forest Service because they had mostly old growth forest left, to start paying attention to the owl. They were really reluctant to do it. They'd tell us that in a meeting, but when you got out on the ground, they were still cutting timber and not paying that much attention to the Spotted Owl. We were unsuccessful in getting things changed through that media. Then, when it came up to being listed, there was some real reluctance because Watt and Odell and some of those guys were in there. It's a little bit like the climate now; they don't want to add any new species. We knew that the biological stuff was there. And Rolf was RD then. There were three of us that tried to convince Rolf that we ought to move ahead no matter what. But Rolf had a good relationship with the Chief of the Forest Service. They talked in over and thought they could.... Well, what happened was that the environmental community on the outside sued us. When it got to the Judge, the Judge sent back and essentially told us do a better job. He said we couldn't ignore this. Then when you get the legal stuff involved, you lose all of your flexibility. You are better off doing something rather than getting the Judge to tell you what to do. That happened in the Fisheries program when Sam went out there. It happened with the Spotted Owl. It happened in all kinds of places; where

you get the Judge starting to tell you what to do. And then, I think too, that when we implemented steel shot, which was a very controversial issue; that probably got Kahler Martinson canned. We pushed it in Region 1 because EIS was down and everything. Arnett was the Director of California at the time and we were really booming on it. California was absolutely adamant against steel shot. They didn't want nothing to do with it. It seems hard to believe now, because steel shot is implemented all over. But that was in the late 1980's and early 1981. We pushed ahead with it, and Kahler particularly. When Arnett got to be the Assistant Secretary, of course Watt was in there then, a lot of people who came in from the outside into those political positions kind of had an axe to grind. They didn't necessarily come in a real good supporter of the FWS. They were usually after [something]. They had some adversarial relationships. When Arnett got in there, he just started chipping away. We had some research guys out working under contract and he got those cancelled. That was about the same time that the Senior Executive Service came in. I guess that would have been under President Carter, or just before in the late 1970s. When Kahler was RD then, he had been under the old Civil Service Program. When they interviewed him, they asked him if he wanted to be in SES. He asked what the pluses of that were. They said he could have unlimited leave to accumulate. They also said that if he didn't like it and wanted to drop back in to the biological end, he could do that. But when it came time for him to do that, they wouldn't let him. They essentially gave him an ultimatum of either going to Albuquerque, or be terminated. He had some special family situations that made that bad. He could just see the handwriting on the wall. He saw Albuquerque as the first; but what was the next. They were using it as a punitive thing rather than on a positive note. That was another issue we were involved in that was very controversial.

Another issue that we crossed Hodell on was, well, I shouldn't say crossed, but there was some power line crossings that they used to like to string across federal lands; particularly BLM, but they could go across us too. We took them on on that. Hodell was head of BPA at the time. They were going to string a line across our Refuge up at Umatilla. The first time I met with them, well, they came in and met with me because I had oversight on Refuges, they said they were doing to do this. I said, "Wait a minute!" They said that they had the steel bought and everything already. I asked them where they had been. "We're going to let you [do that]". That was a key waterfowl area. We fought with them for quite a while. Hodell was the BPA Director. Word got out among the power companies out there that the RD and some of his people were going to be hard nosed about going across refuges with power lines. The word was that every one should be aware of this. I remember that we had a major one that was going to go right across Klamath Basin Refuge. It was a 5000kv line I think. We said, "No". As I remember at the time, Hodell was no longer head of BPA, but he was a kind of consultant for another power company PP&L that was going to bring this line through. There was good biological data that said this was a poor idea. We tried to stop it, but it was still moving ahead. Kahler Martinson was pretty hard nosed on resource issues, so he asked Lynn, who was the Director. Lynn didn't want to take it on real bad. But Kahler asked Lynn if

he minded him going to talk with Andres. That's kind of different. So Lynn told him if he wanted to, it would be all right. Kahler got the maps and went and got an audience with Andres. He just laid it out on the floor and explained another alternative that would be better than this one. After one briefing with Andres, he said that the alternative should be taken. Of course, he had oversight over BLM too. There was a BLM alternative, but it took it away from Klamath Basin.

There were a number of issues like that, which were kind of tough from a political end. Laxhalt was a Senator when we took on some of those issues out at Ruby Lake where the powerboats were at. In California there was Arnett with the steel shot and there was Hodell with the power lines. We weren't exactly making a lot of good political moves. Maybe we were naïve, but it sure got their attention enough so that they weren't just going to do some things that they had done in the past.

DR. MADISON: Larry, thank you very much. I've got to break it off here. This is great!