

Oral History Cover Sheet

Name: Dale Bitner

Date of Interview: 2005

Location of Interview:

Interviewer: Karen Miranda

Approximate years worked for Fish and Wildlife Service: 1984-

Offices and Field Stations Worked, Positions Held: Fire Trainer

Most Important Projects: Fire Training Program Development

Colleagues and Mentors: Art Belcher, Frank Cole, Roger Erb, Phil Street

Most Important Issues: Training development, interagency cooperation

Brief Summary of Interview: Mr. Bitner starts off by talking about his background, and where he went to college. He also talks about the Boise Interagency Fire Center, the USFWS Fire Training Center and the other Fish and Wildlife Service employees involved with that, changes in the fire management system, interagency cooperation, safety, fire crew experiences, and equipment and technical innovations.

Keywords: employee, conservation, education, fire management, grasslands, habitat restoration, overgrazing, prescribed burning, public attitudes, training

-- its about our educational left us alone I don't know if that was the case or not but we survived it somehow I don't know. I come from a military background, World War II and Korea. My mother had 7 brothers and they were all military and my father, of course, went through World War II and so it wasn't something I tried to avoid, just happened. But probably lucky in the long run.

--ok, so, yeah, .. we're rolling we're rolling ...

-- All right, so Dale, were just going to have a conversation. You will be speaking to me.

The questions are not going to be heard on the final tape.

-- Ok.

-- So remember when I ask you something, if I say, you know, where were you born?

don't -- just give me a date.

-- Ok.

-- Say "I was born at...", so that

-- Ok.

-- they can understand it even if they don't have ...

-- Right.

-- So, if you can give us your full name and the way you like it written and spelled.

-- My name is John Dale Bitner, but I typically go by Dale Bitner, my middle name. I was born (is that just what you want to know)

-- Place and date of birth.

-- Oh, date of birth is March 27, 1949. Shortly after WWII. (laughter) My father came home ... and that's how many of us come to be.

-- *If you could give us the spelling of your last name too.*

-- My name is spelled B I T N E R .

-- *Ok, and where were you born?*

-- I was born in Weiser, Idaho, which is about 92 miles north of Boise, in the Weiser Hospital

-- *And if you can give us a little background on your education.*

-- Started, .. of course went to school in a community of about 102 population, Midvale, Idaho, and went to 12 grades there. Came to Boise State College, at that time, here in Boise which is now Boise State University, in 1967 and got a four year degree there in education. And it was about that time I started working for the Bureau of Land Management on their fire crews, basically to pay my way through college, which worked out very nicely.

-- *And what .. what .. what drew you to education what were you particularly interested in?*

-- Probably the most influential individual was a coach I had my senior year. More than a coach, he was an outstanding educator. And in fact he even encouraged me at that time to .. to seek maybe summer employment, enhance my income through working for the Forest Service. Just so happened I ended up here at the fire center.

-- *Was he a fire guy?*

-- Yes he was. He was when he was young, in fact he was even doing it while teaching in those early years where I went to high school.

-- *So what kind of fire fighting were you doing?*

-- When I started, I originally had applied here at that time 1967-68, I applied at the Boise interagency fire center and I had applied for a job on one of the hand line fire crews and didn't reach the position. And then in 1969 what happened was I had a phone call from a good friend who had been hired down here and he said if you get here tomorrow you have a job. So in 1969 I started my employment, my summer employment basically, still going to college at that time, I started my employment here at what we at that time called the Boise area interagency fire center.

-- *So, were you on a hand crew or ...?*

-- I was on a hand crew and line crew. We were specialized spent probably most of our experience, strong experience in fire fighting and management of fires, came actually in Alaska, but we traveled the United States, for the most part in the western United States and the Southwest. And at that time we specialized, my module, my team, specialized in aircraft assisting around aircraft, fixed wing and for the most part helicopters.

-- *And that was here on base?*

-- That was here on base. We'd spend ... one summer I spent 89 days in Alaska we were detailed there and just didn't come home. Most generally we were asked to be prepared to go for a two week stint, so we packed for two week stint, we didn't know where we were going or when we would be back. And it was kind of like the military but they treated us good and it was a great income for a young college man.

-- *Where'd you work? Were you one of the people living on base was that how that worked?*

-- Actually I didn't. I was married at the time and the base is established .. when I first came here we didn't have our barracks at that time. And then they had .. they developed in

1970 or '71, they developed the barracks, the 'A' and the 'B' barracks and one side of the barracks was Forest Service and the other side was BLM and a lot of the folks I worked with actually lived here on base, but I was married and going to college during the off season, so I stayed in my own domicile.

-- *Ok, so you went to college and you did end up... tell us about going on to become a teacher and what you did with your education.*

-- 1972 I started working a local school district, and which I just recently retired, its been a real blessing for me and I'm excited about that. But I continued my work here at the fire center with the Bureau of Land Management and in 1972 they knew I was in education and I became a part of their teaching cadre for fire fighting courses in the summer time, they called it rover training. And we would go .. for the most part we were dealing with Bureau of Land Management, sometimes Forest Service, sometimes Bureau of Indian Affairs, at that time not much Park Service, but we would go to the field and do field training in different courses -- air courses, administrative courses, fire fighting courses themselves. And I was part of that teaching cadre. And then in .. lets see that was 1972 in 1974

-- *Where did you travel?*

-- At that time I started traveling throughout the United States. I could be back in the southeast real easy. And on most of it was centered around the west and the southwest, but we did have occasion to get to Canada and places like that too, and work with the Canadians. And in the early 80s the Fish & Wildlife Service fire program began and I was being detailed from the Bureau of Land Management to do much of their field training for them, their initial fire training for them, so as I worked on detail assignments

in 1984, the first director Art Belcher, offered me a summer employment -- same thing I was doing, but with his agency, and I bit on it.

-- Did you .. what kind of changes did you see when you went from BLM to Fish & Wildlife Service?

-- I think probably the major change was Art's program at that time was just pretty much a skeleton program., It was he and the secretary, and myself in the summer time, and he'd get a few detailers in the summertime to assist him, but not much. So it was basically a lot of work, and it was a lot of fun for me because my background training it was easy for me to do because I knew my subject pretty well and I enjoyed the field and for me it was a delight. For him I think it was a nightmare.

-- Why is that?

-- Well, just because it was so much going on. And basically what he did was he turned over the summer training as much as we could do, and just myself we couldn't do a lot, but we were getting out in the regions at that time. And like I said, he just had so many other things going on. But he basically turned the training over to me and some other side issues which I was able to help him out with. Like I said, after a couple, three summers of detailing over for him then he offered me the position and it wasn't too hard to take, like I said I enjoyed it very much.

-- So you did that every summer for how long?

-- Starting with 1969 went to the US Fish & Wildlife Service in 1984 and I think this in my 36th season. So it's been quite a ride, it's been a lot of fun for me over the years.

-- Yeah, so tell us about what you did summer to summer when you were first hired and then as there were new fire directors kind of how the training program developed.

-- Ok. Of course when I first began out here I was working for the BLM in fire itself. And then they found out I had expertise in teaching, and then once I had a fire background I was a natural for them. And of course I moved on to the Fish & Wildlife with Art, and at first I think his initial task was to get us a base for the training itself. We didn't really have an idea of how many people we had in the Fish & Wildlife, how much training they had. And he was getting a lot of directive I'm sure from Congress, that this needed you know, this needed to take place. So there was push from his standpoint, but as small staff as we had it was very difficult to do. Initially what Art did was, after seeing what we could do in training, then basically he started using expertise from the division of training here in the Bureau of Land Management and he actually got some contractors involved with developing the first course for the US Fish & Wildlife Service. And that course ran probably for, oh, I'm guessing for 4, 5 or 6, 7, years before we actually felt like we got everybody through the initial first time, you now are a fire fighter. So think that was one of the things that the accomplishments that he probably began and it was important because we really didn't know what we had out there. In fact, many of the fire positions that were filled the first time, even the regional coordinators, had very little fire experience and what not, and so it wasn't just training staffers, it was training his administrative people in the regions too. It was a big job.

-- *Ok. So ...*

END OF TAPE

-- Go a direction just ...

-- *Yeah. Then I'm gonna ...*

-- *Ok.*

-- *I am gonna ask you things like your high point, your low point, I mean, you probably might you might catch some of them as you ...*

-- *Yeah, that's fine.*

-- *Unless you've already said them, then I won't ask you. If you had anything interesting, frightening, happen, you know, as a fire fighter, since you have that ... are we rolling?*

-- *Were rolling.*

-- *Ok. So, Dale, you .. you've worked for all four of the Fish & Wildlife fire directors.*

-- *Yes.*

-- *And so, can you .. um .. tell us a little bit about working for each one, you .. first you start with Art.*

-- *I .. I .. I think that I have.. I've had a .. a real luxury of working for the four directors that have been .. um .. heading the Fish & Wildlife Service fire program. I've been very fortunate to have seen that. And I .. and I have to start off by saying that I think that each one of the directors has taken um .. the Service's fire program, and then in a very positive manner, they have all had strengths, and different strengths, but I think each one of them have assisted in the evolution of this program, to a degree that .. that many people will never know. And a .. of course the first director, Art Belcher, who hired me over from the BLM, I'm .. I'm not to sure that maybe he might have had probably the most daunting, most difficult, task of all. As he came in, he came in as an outsider. And to the Fish & Wildlife Service, he came in as a BLM employee. And a .. a .. and basically had to work with a large population that were not really open to him being in that position --*

here was the new kid on the block, a new program. Typically, Fish & Wildlife refuges have a ton of work to do and little personnel to do the job. Not enough money. And here is this new fellow on the block, and he seems to have a lot of money. But the problem is, he's got strings attached to it. So Art comes in, and he not only has to educate .. a .. at the very bottom of the field level, the refuge level, but he also has to do a lot of work with his regional fire coordinators, because they just didn't have the background. Outstanding people. In fact, to my knowledge there is one still left in .. in the a .. in the regional hire and that would be Allen Carter out in the northeast who a .. I'm just terribly impressed with him, because I know when he came in that .. that .. that his background was very, very limited, but he has worked so .. so diligently over the years and .. and does an excellent job for us. So Art comes in, and I think the first thing that I .. that I see as an important thing, is that he took our training program and .. and .. and gave us direction, to the field as: these are the things that were going to have to do. And it wasn't, again, it wasn't easy for them to accept. Early on there was physical restraints, the step test, when that came out I remember going out and doing field sessions and .. and maintenance people, who had fire responsibilities too 'cause they were crossing out of their normal work routine and they were assigned fire duties and this sort of thing, and I remember getting the question many, many, many times, 'are they going to fire me if I can't pass the step test?' I said 'No. No. They're just .. they're upping the ante just a little bit.' But I think Art took the program as far as he could go. He was safety minded. He knew the importance of it. And I think the development of the first training package for Fish & Wildlife, .. most anybody who took that course would say it was one of the best courses they took at that time. And .. and they did give him credit there, but he had a very

difficult task, and I think he took it .. he took it a long ways for us. And so much of the credit for where we're at today, I think, starts with Art. The second director was Frank Cole. And a .. in my perspective, I think Frank Cole, what Frank did was, he came in from the agency, and he was a know product by many of the people within the Fish & Wildlife, and I think one of Frank's strength was probably bringing the field back .. centered their attention back on the program here at the fire center, and the necessity of communication with this .. with this entity. And I think that's one of his greatest strengths -- is the field became very conscious of his role, they accepted his role, and .. and we gained a lot. And I think Frank also was well respected here within the a .. within the other directors of the fire center. And .. and his human trait of being kind and courteous to all was just .. it was something that everybody respected. I think probably the second thing that .. that I .. when I think of Frank Cole, I think of his dedication, of not being afraid to step out and test the waters a little bit with innovative training things. It wasn't .. it wasn't unusual for him to allow us to go out a capture video footage that he knew might not be used for years to come, but to this day we still .. a lot of the assignments that I was sent on from his office to capture video footage and whatnot for training purposes, we still use today. He was not afraid to .. during his time in office, the Fish & Wildlife .. we had a lot of fire people but the refuges were very reluctant to let .. to let them off the refuges. They had duties, and how can we let them go. And Frank worked very hard at that. And I remember one time in the Okefenokee Refuge, we had a fire down there, and he literally went throughout the United States and gathered people to come in a fill fire positions. And I think probably might have been criticized by some, but for the first time we had a number of refuge people filling fire positions and they got

to smell the smoke, and they found out what their, you know, what their .. what their role was in fire, and they come to appreciate their role in fire. And I think that's extremely important to our evolution, as far as where our fire program has come. I think probably the third thing that he .. that he did as, from a training standpoint, was he completed the, again, the evolution of the Fish & Wildlife fire course that Art Belcher had started a few years before. And basically, by the time Frank had finished up his role here at the fire center, that particular course was packaged and put on a shelf. But it did its job. And a .. but, again, I think his strength was probably .. he was some what of the visionary, and could see down the future a ways and it was important to get our people involved. And it was not easy to get them off the refuges, and he kind of pushed that button. The next director was Roger Erb. And Roger Erb and I went back to 1969 when we were on hand line crews here. And he was on a hand line crew, one of the crew besides myself. And of course he took his profession a little bit further along fire than I did because he became full time. He came over from the Bureau of Land Management, and highly touted as a great fire man, or a potential fire person within the Bureau of Land Management. Had a lot of recognition within the other agencies. But now was coming in from the Bureau of Land Management again, so it was kind of interesting to watch how the field would respond to that. But, at this point in time, I think the field now understood that we .. we do have a fire program. It wasn't nearly the issue that maybe Mr. Belcher had gone through years before, and the Frank was trying to help to evolve just a bit. I think Roger's probably, in my mind, one of the strengths that I saw from Roger's time in office, was fiscal accountability. I think he .. I think he worked very hard and diligently at getting the field, the refuge system, to use funding, fire funding, for its proper needs

and whatnot. Because it was .. it was .. a lot of folks that were still trying .. it was money that was available, and sometimes it was easy .. well maybe we could make it another project here. And Roger worked very hard on that. And .. and quite often was not .. people disagreed with his decisions. He made tough decisions. And I think they were decisions that needed to be made. Now we're in the .. the time of Phil Street, and I think the jury's still out. But, in his defense, I think .. a .. probably a couple of strengths that I'm seeing right now .. and I'll have to tell you a story about Phil Street and I think it's .. it's significant, as far as the refuge system. My first experience with Phil Street was when I went on assignment, back to Merritt Island, Frank Cole was the FMO. And when I got back to Merritt Island, Frank Cole didn't know me from anybody, and we had a video crew to go back, and Frank had just had a prescribed burn the day before. And unfortunately, had burnt up an eagles nest -- it was high profile. I think he thought I was back investigating, with a camera crew, so we went out and had our little introductions and whatnot, and make a long story short, we turned that into a training session. But when I was back there, there was a young man that was in charge of the youth group back there, YCC I believe, and his name was Phil Street. And I believe he was being riffed that summer. So as I travel throughout training assignments and whatnot in the field, I tell the story of Phil Street -- started out as a young man in .. in the refuge system, and now is the fire director for the U.S. Fish & Wildlife. And I think that's a tribute to what can happen when you .. when you have vision, when you have dedication. I think Phil's strengths, in my mind, are going to be -- one is his professionalism. I think he expects his people, not only staff wise, but also in the field, to be very professional. He's field orientated. He believes in the field is .. is who we work for. And .. and I also see, all the

directors were very strong in safety. They understood that was why we were here, for safety within our personnel, but I think Phil really, really works hard at that. That, again, I'm .. I'm sure he's got several years in front of him, but right now he's the new kid on the block, and I'm looking forward to spending some time with him.

-- *So .. um .. so, what changes did you see over all these years, I know that's a lot of years to think about, but you talked a little bit about the period when Art was here and then Frank, and so, what changes did you see with the refuge system and the program during the time Roger ...*

-- The .. the fire program? I think ...

-- *Yeah, the fire program.*

-- I think .. I think probably, early on just the naivety the .. naivety that we had within the .. within our .. within the refuge system about what fire was all about. It was .. like I said, it was .. it was a lot of work for people who were already spending a lot of hours each day on the refuge. And here we come in with all this work that had to be done. And there was a lot of resentment there for a while. I think we've evolved now, we've changed hands enough times, that people now, truly understand that it's .. it's just another program that we administer within the refuge system. I think probably the blending of other agencies within the refuge fire program right now is very evident. I see a lot of our .. our people that I've trained in classes 20 years ago now are FMOs, but I also see Bureau of Land Management, I see Park Service people, I see BIA people in here. And I think that's really helped us to grow. I .. I think it's helped the whole program to grow. And .. and what's happened is.. is ..is, we've grown to the point now where we .. we accept it as a program, it's a responsibility. And we have a lot of professional people

with the program, within the refuges now, that understand the responsibility. And I think were just doing a much better job of it. Are we perfect yet? No. But, one of .. one of the perspectives I've been able to have over the years is, where I only work three or four months out of the summer, then I can leave the chaos. And when I come back, I see mammoth changes quite often. And in the 20 years or so that I've been working here, there have been gargantuan changes. And .. and all for the best. And, again, are we there yet? No, were not. But I've seen .. I've seen a program evolve that .. that I'm very proud of and .. and I know that a lot of the fire people, and the directors that came back to be interviewed, I know they've got to be proud of ..of what's happening. But that's probably the biggest change, is just the knowledge that we have in the field today. The Allen Carters who came in with very little, if any knowledge, and now is a regional coordinator. And that's something to be proud of. And a .. I just think the program has .. has come along because we've .. we've brought blood in, and then we now, .. now, we're producing our own. And that's exciting to me. We're producing our own fire people. That's exciting.

-- And so, what do you think Fish & Wildlife has contributed to the interagency community? What is our strength as one of the five federal agencies?

-- Early on, we weren't very receptive to .. to giving much back. We .. we enjoyed the fire funds. We enjoyed the positions and whatnot. But when we'd have national call outs and national emergencies it was very difficult to get our people off a refuge, because that refuge manager could see well, gosh they might be gone two or three weeks, and what are we going to do with this project going on. That's not an issue any longer. I see .. I see us performing like any other agency, when you have national call outs, we're there. I see

detailers coming into this agency all the time, into the .. into the fire center here, all the time, from Fish & Wildlife. I see us contributing in all phases of fire, whether it be wildland fire, prescribed fire... We're .. we're an integral part of it. And it .. it took us a while. It took .. it took a .. the Art Belchers and the Frank Coles and the Roger Erbs. And now, Phil Street, to .. to promote us, but I don't think that's the issue any longer, I don't think there's an issue there at all. I think we're well respected. You go back in history and we've always touted and blown our own horn, you know, we were doing prescribed burn before anybody else. And we were. But early on we weren't telling anybody about what we were doing. We weren't recording that information. And we weren't passing it along. And I think we're doing a better job there now. And, of course, in the refuge system, well, we have .. wildland fires an issue. We're doing our job there too. But, I think, we're doing a better job within the interagency of letting them know that, yes, we do have expertise. And they know that, too. We certainly don't respond to as much wildland fire. We can. And .. and .. and so we fulfill that role. But they use our expertise in other areas, in .. in the prescribed burn. They know that .. they know that we know what we're doing.

-- Yeah. So, what .. what kind of leadership role do you think we have to the other agencies when it comes to prescribed fire?

-- I think all the agencies .. I've watched the Bureau of Land Management last several years, they've really .. you know, they've .. they've stepped out and .. and from what I can see they've stepped out and taken a stronger role in their own .. in their own behalf, on their own behalf. And ... I don't .. you know, I don't see us as being someone that .. that we know everything so come to us. I just see us as being one of the partners now.

And its .. it's a partner that they feel comfortable with, and .. and a .. they know when they come to us, that .. what they're going to get. And that that took some time. And it wasn't because we didn't know it. It was because we didn't have it on paper, and we weren't showing it, because we weren't coming off the refuge, and we weren't willing to go out and assist in the national, because we didn't know that's what our .. that was part of our responsibility. And that took .. that took those fire coordinators a .., like I said, Roger Erb took a big role in that. We've got to get off. We've got to get off. We've got to show them. We've got to be part of the community. And Frank Cole helped to do that, very much so. And .. and once we got off the refuge, then it became very evident that we could .. we could provide a function. National military training that occurs every so often, the very first session that took place was a .. a .. I think every one of the instructors that went on that first assignment were Fish & Wildlife. And I happened to be at a meeting yesterday and they said, 'well, now this is the Fish & Wildlife's contribution.' I said, 'no, at the time everyone was gone on fires, and we were the only ones at home. And the reason we were at home, because the refuge managers wouldn't let us off,' or whatever the case might be. We got out, and we made a big splash. And so that's why people think that 'hey the Fish & Wildlife is part of this military cadre.' We're one of the .. we're one of the role players. That's all we are anymore. But initially we .. we did .. a ..a .. major role there. But today, we've just become one of the role players. And that's as it should be. We're .. we're part of the interagency.

-- *Ok. Well, lets talk about some of your .. your experiences particularly. Do you have any .. can tell us about high points in your career when you look back, at your fire career?*

-- I .. I think the high point would be when I choose to come to the Fish & Wildlife, when I choose to come to work for Art Belcher. Out of all the agencies that I've worked with over the years -- the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and the Park Service, and the Forest Service, and the Bureau of Land Management, and I've done extensive training for most all the agencies, and .. and worked with them on fires. I don't think that I ever found a more dedicated individual than what I've found in the refuge system. And a .. what I found in the refuge system was when you could help a refuge manager, or an assistant manager, with a .. in fire .. a .. and you could relieve some of the pressure and some of the load, or some of the anxiety, they were so appreciative of it. So I think that's probably has to be a highlight of my career. And it extended my career out here. I just thoroughly enjoy working with those people. They .. they take an interest in their job more than anybody that I've ever seen. And a it was refreshing to me.

-- But you are .. you have been a fire fighter, and you've been out on fires. Did you have any frightening experiences on fire?

-- Ah .. a couple of times. But .. probably .. was probably wasn't aware of how dangerous they were. I think any time you fight wildland fire, and especially in .. in a difficult terrain, that we often get involved with .. a lot of the times you don't really recognize .. and part of the issue, is you don't recognize how dangerous it can be. And that's why .. that's why training is important. That's why the experience to guide young people and to .. to teach them on the job. That's why its so important. 'Cause its very easy in wildland fire, or even in prescribed fire, .. We have as many accidents in prescribed fire. We have enough that it would scare ya, because sometimes we .. it becomes too easy for us, we forget about the dangers that are involved. I never

experienced anything like lost any eyebrows or anything like that. But there was a couple of occasions that .. that I know they were awfully close. And .. and fortunately I had great leaders that that were able to keep us out of harms way and And a .. I was .. I was fortunate.

-- *Yeah, you were .. you had the experience of working through a lot of different administrations...*

-- um hmm

-- *And how did those different administrations effect what you were doing on the ground or .. or with training or ...*

-- Administrations as far as ...

-- *Policy. The different presidents and Secretary's of Interior. Any policy changes that occurred during all these years that you were trying to administer training to fire fighters down on the ground.*

-- You .. you know I don't know that at my level that I really recognized too much the difference in .. in .. in administrations as their effect to me. I'm sure that fire directors would not say that. I'm sure that .. 'cause they passed material on to us, and .. and .. and we got the job done. But I know they were influenced by it. But I don't think that at my level .. I don't think that I ever .. that I really felt ... 'cause it's .. it's basically drawn by safety issues, and no administration would look beyond that I don't think. But at .. at the level that I trained at, and worked at, I never really felt too much there.

-- *Um hmm. So, when it comes to safety, what have you seen in terms of changes to safety over the years -- good and bad?*

-- Ah .. you know my initial training, and I had some great training, I had great training. Had great experiences in my early fire experiences. I don't know that were doing anything much different today. I .. it seems like .. it seems like were putting more information out there, but I'm not sure that its making that much difference. I think it's the .. it's the quality of leadership you have, and it's the quality of the individual that's doing the job on the ground for you, and their ability to recognize dangerous situations. I don't think its different than any other profession. You have people who are highly qualified and extremely mature, and they recognize. And I think we find that in fire too. I think the key for us is to understand that no matter how much training we give, no matter how many ten standard fire fighting orders, or 18 situations that you shout watch out, I don't think that takes away from .. from the fact that we have to communicate on the fire, we have to communicate with one another, readily, and we have to have people that are capable of doing those leadership responsibilities. And that's not easy. I .. I choose a long time ago in my fire fighting career not to .. not to be in functions where I was responsible for lives on the fire line, because I didn't want that pressure. So I spent most of my time in service functions and whatnot. I don't regret it. And I did enough on fire line and .. and .. and doing hand line work and whatnot, and pre .. precarious situations, that I learned a long time ago that wasn't for me. I think that takes a special individual and a lot of courage to do those things. And .. and we have a lot of people out there that are doing them. But as far as the safety, I think safety has always been an issue. I think it's a .. maybe its drawn more to the .. to the limelight today because of the exposure we have. And a .. the high profile a fire gets, wildland fire gets, in the population, as we begin to move into the wildland / urban face. And I think it just .. it

comes more to the forefront, but I don't think its ever been dealt with any differently. It's an issue. And it's .. I think it's .. I think it's potentially more dangerous in fire situations today. Because .. because of wildland / urban face and some of our responsibilities. I think its more difficult task.

-- *Ok. All right. Let's hold right there. Watch doing this, because I get ...*

-- Ok. The mike ...

-- *Yeah. Because I get great sounds ...*

-- Ok.

-- *... of you scratching your beard.*

-- Ok.

-- *Oh, do you really?*

-- Yeah. He would.

-- *Ok.*

-- I'm sorry.

-- *Ok do you want to take a minute to look at your notes ...*

-- Sure.

-- *.. see if there is something you haven't covered. I'm going to ask you about -- have you seen any inventions?*

-- You know, in fire, I think its probably more often the case .. my experience has been .. most of my fire experience on ..on the line was not that dangerous, as it was maybe not a pleasant experience. And it was smoky, and dusty, and you wanted to be home, and having a shower, and having a good hot meal. But most of the time .. most of the time I think, for fire people, it's not a .. they do it because they enjoy it -- the camaraderie, you

know. My .. my greatest experiences .. some of my greatest experiences have to be with fire crew. When your tired and your just .. you don't want to be there, but that's your job. You get your break, and some of the dumb things that you do, and some of the conversations you get into. And I .. in all my work experiences I probably would suggest that probably I use more things that I learned in fire in a .. in suppressing fires, with fire crews, I use much of that today even when I'm teaching a school or working out here, because there's a lot of things to be learned. So, some of it's pretty simple. But organization skills, .. when were in Alaska a lot, .. in Alaska it was very difficult to support a fire. No roads, it was mostly air .. air cargo drops. That's you know, you learn how .. you learn how to do without. You learn how to .. to manage your time a lot better. And I have taken those skills and I use them in my own public education. When I'm doing a good quality job, it's things that I learned in that fire setting. So .. ah .. very valuable to me. Like, I wouldn't trade it for the world, but if you told me, would .. would you go out there today, I'd say 'no, it's a young persons job.' It's a difficult task. But most of the time its not hair raising. Most of the time it's not frightening. But that's the tough thing about is you become .. become a .. your mind becomes just kind of blasé about it and .. and all of a sudden you find yourself, if your not being careful, and not thinking about those safety issues, you find yourself in a very difficult situation. Most of the time, your able to eliminate the situation. But there are times when it just doesn't happen. So when we have fatalities there's a lot of reasons for... It's sad when the reason is something they could have prevented. When it's nature, it's just sad. But when we don't use our knowledge, and we don't use our experience, and we don't

communicate, that's when it's very sad when we lose .. when we have a fatality from that, but ...

-- *Do you have any thoughts on any of the fatalities that your aware of that have happened, you know, during the time you've been working?*

-- Ah ... a good share of them could have been avoided. Many of them could have been avoided. Ah .. I think the nature of .. of wildland fire, and .. and again, I say wildland fire, but prescribed fire .. prescribed fire can be every bit as dangerous. Ah .. but I think many of the fatalities, probably most of the fatalities, probably could have been eliminated. Did that mean, necessarily, that the people who are responsible for supervision -- were they just totally inept? No. It's a combination of things. And when you add in nature, and I think what were fighting right now in the fire community, that we've had a lot of years of .. of vegetative growth, and lack of fire, and then the .. the .. weather conditions that we seem to be seeing today, it's adding more complexity to the fires. And .. a .. I think it's a .. I think it's a .. a very difficult field to be in. But most .. most of the time it's a great experience. But there's a few occasions when it's .. you wonder why your doing it.

-- *Have you ever been challenged like that in your career -- to the point of wondering if you would keep doing it?*

-- That's why I moved to training.

-- *Um hmm.*

-- That's why I moved to training. I .. in my .. in my experience on hand line crews allowed me to be at the lowest level of fire fighting. And I've .. I've cherished that. That's never changed. Some of the technology has changed. Some of the equipment has

changed. But how you put out a fire has never changed. And so, I appreciate the time that I spent there, but I .. I .. I wouldn't have hung on this many years if I'd have been directly involved with fire on a daily basis. Working with people, making their lives a little easier for them in fire situations, and making them a little safer, was my challenge. But .. but to smell smoke all the time, I .. I wouldn't have been cut out for that.

-- *Hmm ... So, did you see any innovations or inventions as you worked?*

-- Oh, .. over the years probably some of the concoctions that were developed .. that were developed to a .. make hand line construction -- flail trenchers .. a .. Of course, the advent of the ATV, the four wheelers and whatnot, have made a tremendous change. I've seen drip torches that have been produced by the field that, you know, emit .. or those are way down the ladder, but, like in the refuge system, people have developed a lot of things. Sometimes to the point .. and this is one of the things that we had to learn in the Fish & Wildlife, ... for years people were burning on refuges, but they were necessarily always burning it in a safe manner. And that was a hard .. that was a hard thing to change. We had to .. we had to change the mentality that: it looks safe, it could be safe. But if, you know, someone is lost, that's the ultimate price you pay. So we had to kind of get our selves through that and say well, this innovative tool is probably more dangerous than what its worth. But we've seen a lot, you know, we've seen a lot of things, but, you know, I speak more to the ground level, there's been a lot of things that have been developed. From the Pulaski to, you know, to the McLeod, to the cowsil tool that you don't see anymore, it's a great tool but ... And .. and you'll see tools kind of come back too. When I first started working with the Fish & Wildlife, in the early 80s, I'd never heard of .. of a fire swatter, or flapper. And of course, the Fish & Wildlife, and as soon as

we .. soon as the Fish & Wildlife came upon the scene, I know at the fire center warehouse, fire swatters became part of the tools that .. that they have there. Now, does that mean everybody want a fire swatter in the fire community? No. But in certain places, .. and in prairies and grasslands and .. and some desert fuels and whatnot, they work well. So, ... you know we've contributed some things there to the .. to the total picture to the fire community, but .. ah .. There's probably been far too many inventions, there still are, ... There's been lots of things that have come along that have made the lives easier and .. and more productive. But there's been a lot of things developed too, that just fell by the wayside too.

-- *Um hmm. Ok. Well, did .. did you run into any impediments, major impediments in your job, of training?*

-- Probably the .. probably the biggest impediment for me was my personal conservatism. I'm just naturally that way, so ... I remember when Frank Cole came on as director, he gave me an assignment one time, and he attached a dollar figure to it. And I said, 'Frank,' I said, 'in public education I don't see this much money in 20 years, so, if I'm a little conservative with my point of view here, be patient with me.' Which he always was. But I would say that was probably the most difficult, and that's just a personal thing. I .. I have a tendency to .. show me first. And then you have the other people out there. I .. I'm the kind of one that makes you compromise. But .. a .. probably the thing that held me back most was myself.

-- *Well, I don't know that you could say that. You certainly contributed.*

-- Well, yeah.

-- *A lot of years.*

-- A lot of years. That's .. I'm proud of it.

-- *Yeah.*

-- I am proud.

-- *Yeah, you should be.*

-- *Um ... So, you've been very helpful in helping us get a picture of the history of the fire program and ..um .. are there other folks that you think about that might be able to give us a perspective? That would be helpful.*

-- You know, there's been so ... I .. I .. I don't know of any particular names. There have been so many people that, you know, ... You and I have had a discussion about the Karen Smiths .. whose retired Fish & Wildlife. There so many people out there at the refuge level, that will never get credit. I mean, they won't get the credit outside of that refuge, or that region. And .. and as they retire, the credit dissipates too. But there's been a lot of people who've .. who've seen prescribed fire early in the Fish & Wildlife Service, and wildland fire, there have been a lot of people who .. who deserve a lot of credit. There's .. there's people that probably stepped on toes to point out the fact that our program was not following what we should have been doing. And .. and those people had frustration, and .. and may have ended their careers, one of them. People .. people that pointed out inadequacies are just as important as the people who have been able to contribute by .. by producing right then. But, some of the people who .. who maybe contributed by saying this is wrong, .. eventually someone was listening. And I think those people are awfully important for us too. So there's .. there's a lot of people in this refuge system. They all .. they all wear a lot of hats. They've done a good job.

-- And so, about the future for the program -- what do you .. what direction do you think its taking? Where do you see it going or ...?

-- I see ...

-- What do we need to do?

-- I think the future .. I think the future is .. is no different for us, probably, for the most part, than it is for any of the other agencies that deal with fire. We have a little bit different slant to our needs out there, but I think we've come to realize that there are certain things that we do exactly like the Bureau of Land Management and the Forest Service. And I .. I see the staff here at the fire center, within our own office, within the Fish & Wildlife branch of fire, I see the staff levels getting to a point where it .. it .. it's allowing them to do more of the job that's in front of us out there. And it .. capturing this information, I think that's kind of important too. But, I think, the future is just more of the same. And .. and as Congress gives money and Congress takes money, it makes the job sometimes difficult. Sometimes it makes it easy. It would appear right now that were losing some funding here and there, so that makes .. makes peoples jobs a little more difficult. Puts a little more pressure on them to produce more with less. It'll take place. But, I see the role .. I thin... We're a member of the fire community. We're totally accepted. We have contributions that .. that they expect from us, and we expect from them, so ... I think .. I think our organization is going to continue to get stronger. But I don't .. I don't see the major changes that have taken place in the last 10 or 15 years. There were major changes. Major changes. And a .. we've come a long, long way.

-- And .. um .. so, in your opinion, what makes Fish & Wildlife different from the other agencies?

-- I think at the ground level, and .. and this maybe changing somewhat, but when I first started, when I was detailing over for Mr. Belcher in the early 80s, when I would travel out to the refuges, quite often the refuge manager, or the assistant manager, would be living right on the refuge. And it was almost like it was their home, and their property. And .. and they treat .. they treated it as that. Not .. not to the point where you, you know, you can't touch or you can't do this or this is **my** place. It was, they were so proud of it. And .. and I think that's .. that's still there. That's still there. I think the .. in the refuge, when you travel to different refuges, there still a difference between a refuge and .. a ... as a visitor on the refuge, there's a difference between a refuge and a park ... a national park. And .. um .. what a .. what's enlightening to me, and in most of the refuges system, the refuge exists for something in particular. It might be a field mouse. It might be an owl. You know, it might be prairie skipper, a butterfly. But it exists for that. And that what's .. that what I like about it. And .. and the whole driving force is to .. is to continue that. It doesn't exist for .. um .. visitors. I mean, they might have access, and they might not have access, ... but it exists for something on that refuge. And I think that's important. You know, I go back to an experience with Karen Smith at Lost Wood Refuge in North Dakota. And the first time I met her and .. um .. she was frustrated, because she was trying to reestablish natural prairie and she'd stopped some grazing rights for the local ranchers and, of course, she wasn't a favorite of anybody in the community. And just a few years ago I traveled back. And I've been back to the refuge several times, and I watched her grow, and I've watched the refuge. And the last time back, 6, 7 years ago probably, she was reintroducing cattle. And she was popular in the community again. And what .. what she had been able to accomplish was something they

couldn't see. Once she got the refuge healthy again, and once she had the natural grasses back, then she could reintroduce. And .. um .. the dedication you see in a person like her to bring back something, I don't know that you see that sometimes in other agencies. They're out there. But I think I saw more in refuges than anyplace else. The dedication is unbelievable sometimes.

-- *Could you describe what Karen did up there with fire?*

-- Well, I think probably what she .. she .. she figured out that fire was the way to reintroduce .. reintroduce the prairie that once existed. And in fact, I think she had some, similar in the amount of around 4000 acres, of what they considered natural prairie, that they believed that probably a plow had never touched it. So, she had something to work with. And she had a lot of invasive species. And .. and .. um .. and um .. the wildlife was .. was not there like it was, because of .. of the vegetation that was invading. And so she spent a number of years, I remember the first prescribed burn that she did was during the Art Belcher years. And .. and they were recommending that she use a heli-torch, and aerial ignite from the air. And she was bound and determined that she could do it with a drip torch. And they were concerned about safety. And she said I can handle it. She pulled the burn off, and she did a masterful job of it. And everyone was relieved, but a .. she had a burning program going up there, and I've seen it several times. And what she's been able to do is bring back, like I said, most of the native species. And along with that came the wildlife one also. She deserves a lot of credit.

-- *There's some water there Dale, why don't you ...*

-- One of my .. one of my pet peeves with Karen was .. she probably has to be one of the leading authorities in prairie, in prairie restoration. And I nipped her one time because I was up there on assignment, excuse me, and she'd been asked by the Forest Service ...

-- *Could you just, excuse me though, ... Could you just start over so we can get the whole thing together. So your rolling right now. Ok. So, tell us tell us about Karen.*

-- Karen .. Karen was a, in my opinion, and probably in a lot of peoples opinions, ...

-- *Ok. Let's stop.*

-- Ok.

-- *Were going to have to do another tape.*

-- Ok.

-- Ok.

-- Rolling.

-- ok.

-- ok. So tell us about Karen Smith up at Lost Wood and the work she did.

-- Well, my first experience .. my first experience with Karen, I was doing some training in .. in the area, and I remember I had some a .. some volunteer staff, and actually some of her full time or seasonal employees there had come down for training. And they said our refuse manager wants you to come up to the refuge and see what's going on. And I thought, you know, well, who am I. But anyway, I humored them and I went up and it was a great, great time. But I went up .. got .. that was my first opportunity of visiting with Karen Smith, who I have a great admiration, for her work and for her knowledge, and as an individual. And she explained to me what had been taking place on the refuge for years and the .. and the prairie had basically disappeared. She did have some natural

prairie that she was working with to try to restore. And um .. she was very successful at it, as I mentioned a little earlier she .. she stopped grazing for the cattle on the refuge and that didn't make her very popular. But it was for the right reasons. And then after a few years ago she was actually able to bring grazing back on. Which basically simulated the bison probably of early days on the refuge itself, so ... But, I was saying that a .. I kind of had to nip at Karen one time because she was telling me on one of her .. a .. times we went down and had dinner with her I think, and she was saying well one of the Forest Service .. a ..a .. groups had asked her to come down and talk about prairie, and she said 'I .. I just .. I just .. I just .. I just .. I don't .. I just don't have the time, I don't have ...' I said, 'Karen, quit making excuses.' I said, 'They're asking you for a reason. They want to pick your brain. You know something that they don't know.' So, ... and I think she finally did get down on several occasions. But it was difficult. Typically as a refuge manager they don't have time, because they're basically, .. they're devoted to every aspect of that refuge, from maybe running a backhoe to dig a septic line up from .. for the home, or they maybe doing some prescribed burning, or they maybe building birdfeeders. So they're so dedicated it's hard for them to pull themselves away. And I think that was hard for many of them early on to .. to recognize. The fact that they knew something that no one else knew, and it was an opportunity for them to share, but, ... So I have a great admiration, and one of these days I .. I'd really like to go back to Lost Wood. I understand that she did retire a few years ago and that she lives in the area. But I've always wanted to go back...

-- Tell us what she did with fire up there.

-- Well, she .. she introduced fire ... she reintroduced fire because she understood the role that fire had. It took her a while. She said it took her a while to figure out the role that fire actually had. And then it took her a while to figure out how to use fire to reintroduce, because it .. the first few time she used fire, .. a .. she was still learning too, and, actually, I think, she created some .. some situations that she didn't want. But over a period of years she learned how to use fire, and use it to her benefit. And so, what she was able to do was, as she learned, she was able to bring that refuge back into, maybe, its earlier state. And ..um .. that's an example of .. of what was taking place in the refuge system. Karen, in her day, would have been .. would have been somewhat unique as a refuge manager because she was .. she was willing to use fire. A lot of our refuge managers were frightened of it. Because, when the fire program came into existence, they were being told that you have to do this for liability, and this, and this. And so, many of them that were burning at one point in time said well this is really kind of dangerous. So they kind of stopped. Karen wasn't one of those. She .. she continued through that time. But she also had prairie. So, maybe she felt a little more comfortable. But she used fire to her benefit. And I think if you went to the refuge today, you'd .. you'd see that she changed it. She brought it back