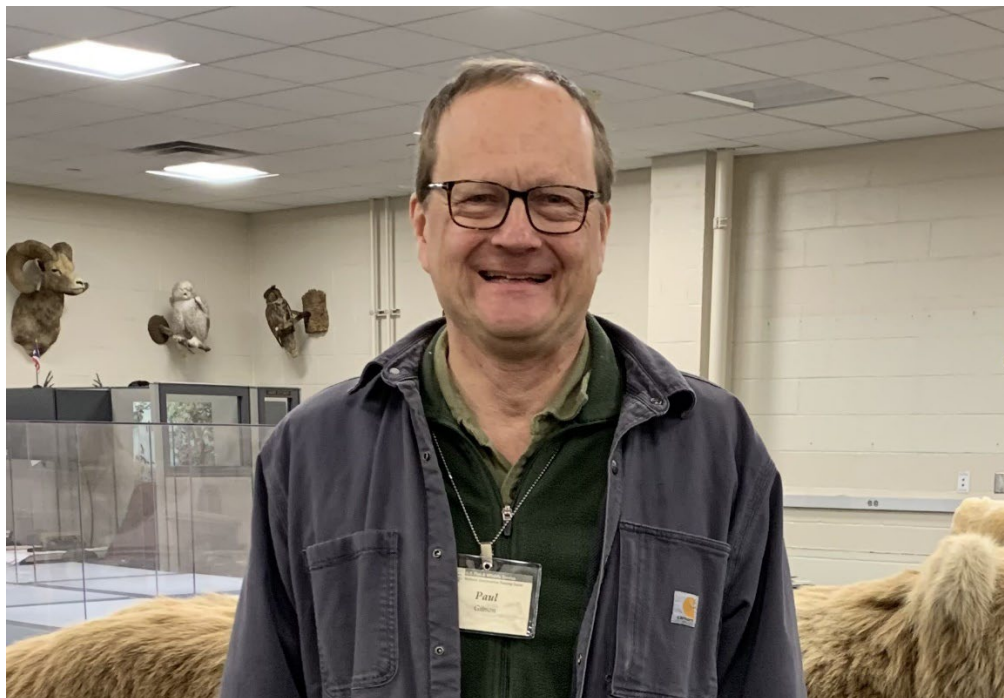




The Oral History of Paul Gibson

November 30, 2023

Interview conducted by Peggy Hobbs
National Conservation Training Center
Shepherdstown, West Virginia



Oral History Cover Sheet

Name: Paul Gibson

Date of Interview: November 30, 2023

Location of Interview: National Conservation Training Center, Shepherdstown, WV

Interviewer: Peggy Hobbs

Approximate years in Conservation: 5

Offices and Field Stations Worked, Positions Held: Assistant Director for Information Resources and Technology Management, IRTM.

Most Important Projects: Administrative and technical support handled in the Service was implemented into a nationwide team. Transition from Google email system to Microsoft Teams during COVID pandemic and remote work.

Colleagues and Mentors: Steve Guertin, Martin Smith.

Brief Summary of Interview: Paul was born and raised in Wisconsin where he grew up camping, hiking and fishing on the shores of Lake Michigan. While attending the University of Wisconsin, he studied abroad for a year at the University of Copenhagen. He went to graduate school initially at George Washington University in Washington, DC and received his degree in International Affairs. In the early years of his career, he worked as an Economist for USDA. After a period of time, he desired a change and switched to the IT field where he received a second master's degree from Syracuse University in Information Management. It was being in the IT field that led him to his position at the USFWS. In this oral history, he discusses the opportunities and challenges he encountered as the Assistant Director for Information Resources and Technology Management, IRTM.

INTERVIEW

PEGGY HOBBS: Okay. My name is Peggy Hobbs. We're here at the National Conservation Training Center in Shepherdstown, West Virginia. And today we'll be doing the retiree interview for Paul Gibson. Okay, Paul, we're just going to dive right in. Start at the very beginning. Where and when were you born and where did you grow up?

PAUL GIBSON: I was born in 1960, in Sheboygan, Wisconsin, on the shores of Lake Michigan, and that's where I grew up and stayed there until I went off to my junior year of college. So, till I was about 20.

PEGGY: Okay. And what did your parents do for a living?

PAUL: My dad was a music teacher and a conductor of a community band. So, we always had a lot of music around the house. And my mother was a secretary in the school system.

PEGGY: Nice. And what influenced you the most? Hobbies? Books? People, early jobs, things like that.

PAUL: We spent a lot of time outdoors. We would do a lot of family camping trips from almost as young as I can remember. There's actually a picture of me in a dish tub at a campsite, getting a bath. So even before I could remember, we've been camping and hiking and traveling around the state and the Midwest, and a few longer road trips to see state parks, wildlife areas, national parks. And also visit my mother's hometown, which was on the shores of Lake Superior, a town called Bayfield, where we also did a lot of outdoor activities.

So those were big influences to me in my early years.

PEGGY: Very nice. Did you hunt or fish or have outdoor interests like hiking, camping?

PAUL: Yes. My grandfather from up in northern Wisconsin taught me how to fish. And we would go fishing on inland lakes up there, and we would also go, when I was a little bit bigger, we would go out on Lake Superior in his little boat and fish out there too. So, that's something that I've carried with me ever since. I've got his old fly-tying collection, his old fly rods and things like that. So, some of those things go back 80 years.

PEGGY: Wow. That's amazing. That's cool. All right. What high school did you attend and when did you graduate?

PAUL: Sheboygan North High in 1978.

PEGGY: And what college or colleges did you attend? When did you graduate? And what degrees did you earn and what majors?

PAUL: Okay, so I attended the University of Wisconsin for my undergraduate. I spent the first two years at the satellite campus of the University of Wisconsin in my hometown of Sheboygan. And then after two years, I joined the study abroad program of the university. And I went to Copenhagen, Denmark, for the year and studied there at the University of Copenhagen in their foreign student program.

And then was having so much fun overseas, I took six months off and traveled on my own around the world the other way to come back. And then I finished off at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and graduated there in '85. Since I spent a little extra time, I was on the five-year plan. And then I went to Washington, DC directly into graduate school, George Washington University, where I studied international affairs.

So, economics and political science. I had developed a big interest in that area. Growing up was the Vietnam War era, Watergate things like that. And also just from my travels, it just seemed like a good fit at the time.

PEGGY: Sure. And what was your undergraduate?

PAUL: Political science.

PEGGY: Political science.

PAUL: And then just to highlight what's coming up a little later is, I did a bit of a career change after 10 or 12 years and got a master's in information management from Syracuse University.

PEGGY: Okay. Who or what influenced your education and career track in particular? Anyone?

PAUL: My family was very interested in current events and politics, and I think that helped on the political science and the international affairs side. And then I think also my interest in the outdoors also helped influence my career and has been sort of like an interest and a hobby and a little more structure later on as you'll hear in studying natural history.

PEGGY: Did you serve in the military?

PAUL: No.

PEGGY: Okay, let's see. Were you ever married?

PAUL: Yes. My wife is Mary Bohman. We got married in 19, I should know this, 2002. Yes.

PEGGY: Okay. And do you have children?

PAUL: No.

PEGGY: Okay. How did your career affect your family, you and your wife, if it did?

PAUL: I don't think it affected it all that much. I never moved around. I was actually married a time before that as well and never moved around for my career geographically or anything like that. So, I think the only real effect might have been occasional travel for work, but we both had that.

PEGGY: And that was occasional?

PAUL: Yeah.

PEGGY: What attracted you to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service?

PAUL: A lot of things. Like I said, I changed my career. When I graduated, I went to the U.S. International Trade Commission for about 10 or 12 years and as an economist and enjoyed that. But it also gave me the opportunity because I finally had free time after not being in graduate school and did a lot of exploring around this area of Virginia, West Virginia, looking at hiking and discovering that there's bears in the woods up in Shenandoah. And did a lot of backpacking and backcountry camping and developed...was able to reengage with from my childhood the experiences of being outside. And I also got to the point of wanting a career change, which took me into the IT field. And so, it was really the IT field that got me to the Fish and Wildlife Service, because they wouldn't have hired me as a trade policy economist, and I probably wouldn't have been interested in applying.

PEGGY: So, you started out with Fish and Wildlife as an IT person?

PAUL: Yes. Yeah.

PEGGY: Okay.

PAUL: Yes. So, by the time I got here in my career, I had moved over into the IT field and worked at USDA for 20 plus years.

PEGGY: Oh, wow.

PAUL: In different IT leadership positions as well. And then with my personal interest in wildlife and nature, I got involved volunteering as a citizen scientist in Arlington, doing water quality monitoring in the streams and collecting data that the county would use for their stormwater runoff permits with the state and bluebird box monitoring and things like that, habitat restoration, just cleaning out invasives. And so that just became a bigger and bigger part of my interest. And it's like the technology component of conservation and science is really crucial. It's really important and it's really large. And so, I just kind of evolved towards merging my two tracks, my professional interests and my personal interests.

And when I came here, I had just been at the Agricultural Research Service of USDA, which is a big science agency. And so, this just seemed like a more logical progression. And I was interested in science, but more interested in conservation and the work of the Service. And it just seemed like an ideal blending of both my professional and personal interests. And I couldn't be happier that it all worked out that way.

PEGGY: Yeah, perfect. And what year would that have been that you started with Fish and Wildlife?

PAUL: 2018. So, five years ago this week.

PEGGY: 2018. Oh, wow.

PAUL: As luck would have it. Yeah.

PEGGY: Okay. What was your job title when you started?

PAUL: Assistant director for information resources and technology management, IRTM.

PEGGY: Yeah. Okay. And was it in headquarters?

PAUL: Yes. My office was at Skyline, Falls Church.

PEGGY: And is that the position you held throughout your career?

PAUL: Yes. The whole time.

PAUL: Yeah. Okay.

PEGGY: And how long did you work for the Service? You just retired this year?

PAUL: Yeah. Retired in May [2023]. Four and a half years or so.

PEGGY: Okay. And what basically were your day-to-day duties when you worked?

PAUL: No two days were the same, just part of the appeal to me personally, I like that. So, I would go represent the Service with the department at DOI. The department's office of the Chief Information Officer has a big say in everything from the selection of the person who goes into that position to what the Service does on a regular basis with technology, how it does it, and cybersecurity.

So, there were always at least a couple of meetings a week with them on that, and then requisite preparation and talking with staff before and after about those meetings. And then meeting with the directorate, there were regular directorate calls to talk about issues of the day. And that's where I would bring up IT initiatives or concerns or changes that might be coming. And coordinating with staff on

priorities for IT challenges that we're facing and projects that we're doing and trying to keep moving forward. And taking stock of what we're doing and seeing if we need to change priorities or change our vision or our strategy for how to best help the Service use technology as a part of the mission.

PEGGY: Okay. Were there any major projects, issues, or stories you'd like to share and how were any issues resolved that come to mind, like the day-to-day?

PAUL: Yes, yes, exactly, and sort of resolved through the day-to-day things like that, but I can elaborate. In thinking about this and looking back, I think there's a small handful of large projects that were really critical that I provided leadership on and worked on over the time. When I got here, and this is a bit of a history thing. The Service had literally just changed in terms of reorganizing how administrative and technical support is handled in the Service and went from both IT as well as HR and all the other things that are now in the group called JAO.

All of the IT came from the regional offices and were organizationally joined to and reported to me, in IRTM headquarters. Prior to that time, they reported directly to the regional director or reported through our regional directorate team, so that organizational change happened literally a few weeks before I got here. So, my big challenge was to help implement it and have it be successful in terms of building a nationwide team out of what formerly had been nine teams, eight regional IT teams, plus headquarters.

Even though IRTM had provided guidance and direction from headquarters, the ability prior to that consolidation, the ability to enforce and hold accountable was not a direct line from the IT leadership. And in a few years before this change was made, Congress enacted a new law that dictated that not only shall a bureau, CIOs in their parlance, (chief information officer) have that direct line to the IT throughout the organization, but also that the department has direct oversight and authority over the bureau of CIOs, or as we call it here, the AD for IRTM or ACIO.

So, this was kind of enacting that law, but also enacting that organizational change, but also enacting the cultural change around it for people to be able to become part of a larger team, yet still provide service for their traditional regional customers that they had been...

PEGGY: So, what were some of the challenges in implementing that? I can only imagine.

PAUL: Yes, there were a few. So, first of all, each regional office, they had their cybersecurity team, their network team, their policy team, their helpdesk team, etc., etc. But we needed one nationwide. And so, what we ended up doing was giving everybody the opportunity to state their priorities of the types of jobs that they would like to do. And we built an organizational structure for the nationwide organization with just one of those groups that I just mentioned, plus a couple others, and then notionally sketched out the branches and said, here's how it's gonna look.

And give us your top three priorities of what you want to do. And then we worked through those and assessed those against people's skills and background and our ability to provide training for those who had basically expressed an interest in a career change and then assigned people. So, what happened, and

this was probably the biggest culture change that a lot of people had to go through was they went from being the IT person down the hall to being on a nationwide team where their boss could have been across country, and they were working on something that wasn't even related to the location.

So that was a big challenge, because we also needed to make sure that we had continuity of service, both at the site, but also a bit of a culture change with people that, when you call the helpdesk, your first impulse should be to call the helpdesk when you have a problem and not necessarily go to your old friend who used to fix things down the hall because they may be working in a different job now. But also, there's a nationwide team. So, if you're in Hadley, somebody in Albuquerque might pick up and fix your problem faster than you could walk down the hall.

That was the model that we were striving for. And that took a lot of culture change, both on our part as well as on the part of our customers, too.

PEGGY: Did that happen in conjunction with the JAO shift, or was it going to happen regardless, it seemed?

PAUL: Originally it was all gonna be part of JAO. And that's where the department weighed in and said, no, we need this direct line of authority from the department CIO to the ACIO, the associate CIO at the bureau. And so, if it had stayed with JAO, then the director of JAO would have been the boss of the IT group, in effect. That was changed so that you'd have that direct line of authority.

PEGGY: And for the record, JAO, I believe was joint administrative organization.

PAUL: Operations.

PEGGY: Operations. Yes, thank you. Okay. Were you able to retain all those regional employees in this reorganization, or was there any type of attrition or re-shifting?

PAUL: We didn't lose as many people. There's often turnover in IT jobs, especially in the helpdesk/service desk because it's hard work in the sense that people are often coming to you unhappy. And so, we have natural turnover anyhow or it's also a springboard to moving into other jobs in IT in the same organization. I don't think we ever really did a study as to whether we had more attrition. We certainly lost people because of it.

We couldn't make everybody happy. I mean, we had 200 people to move around and not everybody was gonna be happy. We also had to take into account some people kind of needed to stay where they were for a while because they had so much expertise in a critical specialty so that we could train up a bench around them. So, we definitely lost people. I'm sure we lost people. And I remember hearing about some cases, but I can't say what percentage, but it happened.

PEGGY: Yeah, I'm sure. Well, even though it was just five short years, did you witness any new technological advances in the IT world in that four or five years?

PAUL: Well, a couple of things on that. From the IRTM perspective, one of the biggest things that we experienced was changing from the Google email system to Microsoft Teams. And if ever there was a fortuitous change, it was that because we did it in a couple of months, unbeknownst to us, that we were all gonna be out on remote work because of the pandemic. And so that was a huge change in technology.

It was a huge change in how we support those central services, and it was a huge change for the Service in terms of how to conduct business, because the Service was able to adapt that quickly. And we rolled it out quickly in a way that people could continue working, however, from home. So that's one of them.

The other one is...The Service has technology everywhere. And it always continues to advance. We went from one of our biggest problems in a field-based organization such as this is network connectivity especially in remote locations. Refuges, hatcheries are in remote locations by design because that's where they need to be. That's the worst place to bring high performance network capacity.

It costs millions of dollars. I mean, I won't name the place, but in my home state, there was a site that needed a new network circuit to go to, and it was a six-mile run that they would have to put out to that site. And the cost estimate came in as \$2 million. So, it just happens to be very difficult.

However, a big change that happened while I was here and I encouraged strenuously, was to bring in these newly emerging satellite-based internet. There's several companies out there that provide these massive constellations of low Earth orbit satellites that you can get extremely good throughput on. And that's ideal for a lot of remote sites because it's low cost. It's a few hundred dollars to buy the equipment and monthly cost for a bill comparable to you paying your cable at home.

PEGGY: So, we still use that today?

PAUL: We use that a lot now.

PEGGY: Yeah, that makes sense.

PAUL: We use that a lot now. That was a really big change. And then there's just technology everywhere. There's PIT tags on fish. There's sensors all over the landscape. There's genetics work at the Fish Technology Centers. On and on and on, and there's lots of specialized hardware and software. And that all continues to advance. And that trend is only going to continue of more science requiring and conservation work in the field, simply requiring technology in order to do it.

People want to be able to monitor, and they should be able to monitor the water temperature at a hatchery, from home, or from the road or wherever, in order to understand what's happening on site if nobody can be there for a period of time. So just numerous, numerous examples like that of technology enabling and being a critical, integral part of the mission of the Service.

PEGGY: And that's part of the technology revolution you've seen in the last five years.

PAUL: Yes, exactly. I've seen it get more complicated, get more all-pervasive. People are starting to use artificial intelligence, experimenting with it in terms of either analyzing or just getting a handle on it trying to understand. Is it the big challenge that we read about in the media, or can we harness this for good? So, there's a lot of that going around.

PEGGY: Right. Now, I would think you would, but did you get support pretty much from headquarters and the bureau as a whole? Because we needed you.

PAUL: Yes, yes. No. I always felt very supported and the track record for funding IT is always challenging in any organization. And most organizations see it as overhead and as taking money from "my budget" in order to support your budget, which is your IT thing. And it's like, no, it's not our IT thing, it's your IT thing.

PEGGY: But is that where you get your budget basically from this pitching in?

PAUL: Yeah, basically. Yeah. I mean.

PEGGY: You don't get your own budget really?

PAUL: Well, the budget is built up from other allocations like that. And so that makes for some pretty spirited discussions with the representatives from the program offices who want to understand where the money is going and why. And we want to be able to explain that very clearly, because they have a right to know. And that kind of accountability is really important because IT is expensive. For the amount of money that is spent on IT here, the Service is truly getting a deal.

There are a lot of science agencies that...but they may have a special appropriation line for IT and things like that, that. But it's important to have that sort of accountability. And that in turn leads to some conversations that can be difficult. But everybody needs technology in one way or another to do their job, whether it's your desktop or whether it's field biologists out in the field with a satellite device so that they can communicate in case they have an emergency. Or they're collecting data from a data collector in the field or whatever and those only proliferate so.

PEGGY: What would you say, was there a high point in your career?

PAUL: So actually, I think the high point was trying to help rationalize that process and deal with that tension, not just around the money, but around technology that is needed for the mission. Most IT organizations are most comfortable with your standard desktop computer servers, the network and the connection to the internet. And it's all standardized. It's all the same thing. Everybody knows how to maintain it. There's nothing...You're not introducing a lot of cybersecurity risks and it's easier to manage.

However, when you have bioinformatics labs and when you have all of the sensor data or specialized databases that are used for analyzing data that comes off of a sequencer. Or data that you need to share with a counterpart in a foreign country that we may have restrictions with about data transfer and things like that, it leads to a lot of tension between the program and IT organization.

But you can't run a conservation program. You can't do science without non-standard IT. So, you have to go away from this notion of everybody has the same computer and a single network and everything to accepting a proliferation of technology in the workplace on the network that is not standard, that is not of our favorite operating systems. There's a lot of Linux that's involved with scientific applications and programs, for example, with Macs. But is necessary in order for people to do their job.

And so, what I wanted to do was to let's bring all this out in the open. In the prior model, I think a lot of those questions went to the regional lead for IT. And they'd either say, well, just go ahead or they'd say X, Y, and Z, fix it this way and it'll be more secure, but use it and do your job. But that was even uneven across the country.

So, what we wanted was a common process that anybody who needs nonstandard technology can come to. And we have representatives from our different technical specialties in IRTM, network data, cybersecurity, etc. and applications. And they can evaluate applications, whatever it is, whatever the tool is, and say okay, this was made in a place we really don't want this on our network. Or if you really need to have it, we're going to put it on a segment of the network that can't talk to the internet. And work through what does that mean? If it's a data collector, how do you move the data if it's not on the network? Well, there's ways you can do that, obviously. But the point is, we don't want to drive it underground for people to use those tools because when a bad thing happens, we need to know what we have on our network and how to troubleshoot it or get it off the network or fix it or upgrade it or whatever. And we want people who use these tools to develop data, which is an asset of the Service for that asset to be preserved and for its data integrity to be maintained. And this whole area is one of the biggest challenges in the IT field and it's only going to grow.

That was the biggest challenge that I faced here in terms of making that a standard process. Making sure that we get, first of all, our team to buy into it and establish it as a process that we're comfortable with. And then roll it out and have it built into the procurement chains, have it built into awareness among people who are heavy technology users that you can probably buy that, but you need to go get it cleared with IRTM first. Because we also might have answered the same question for other people and found a more secure solution or a solution that they could use instead.

And then they've got a partner in the Service who uses the same tool, and they can be a little community of practice of their own on things like that. So, that's a big culture change rock to roll up a hill. But I'm proudest of the fact that we got that set up and it's running and working well now.

PEGGY: Yeah. Well then you know we go on to any low points in your career. But you mentioned your challenges, maybe that's your low point is just dealing with those challenges.

PAUL: Yeah. That's both a high and a low at the same time. It's a challenge and an opportunity and an accomplishment. Yeah, for sure.

PEGGY: Is there anything you wish you'd done differently or probably, you kind of took the path you had to, I guess.

PAUL: Yeah, we did. I mean, I'm a believer in versioning and you roll it out and try it and revise as we learn and do continuous learning and improvement.

PEGGY: Yeah. Were there impediments to trying to do what you wanted to do?

PAUL: I don't know how many impediments. I don't know if impediments is the right word or if it was just, I guess, in the sense of it changing the process and culture change. And also, that, oh, this is IRTM adding another step to an already slow procurement process. So, there's public relations in that regard to try and take on all this. But this is better for the reasons that I mentioned earlier.

PEGGY: Who would have been your supervisors? I'm trying to...you would have had.

PAUL: So, Steve Guertin, deputy director. He was my supervisor the whole time. I ended up working a lot with the directorate and with my peers on the AD.

PEGGY: Right. Were there individuals that helped shape your career along the way or is just these folks that you just mentioned pretty much? Did you have mentors?

PAUL: I guess I had a sort of an informal mentor. I mean, the very first boss who hired me as an economist was also an economist who was heavily into technology, and Martin Smith at the U.S. International Trade Commission. And we're still in touch. He's since retired. And he was always looking for ways to use technology to make your life better. And to make your job better and what you do better.

PEGGY: Even back then?

PAUL: Even back then. Because when I started, okay, I started there in 1985 to work as a summer intern, a program analogous to the DFP by the way. He put me to work building a database and was using a desktop computer. And those were like the first desktop computers that started to come into offices and quickly adopted those. And he was keen developing those and upgrading them. He strung the first network cable in our building, which is the building that is now the Hotel Monaco. So, a very historic building that you're not supposed to drive nails in the plaster or anything like that. But we're out there stringing network cable because he's like, we had five PCs around the building, and we would do work on one and then go to another one with a floppy disk in our hand, and he goes, "there's these things called networks." He was always thinking ahead. He kind of helped me...

PEGGY: But 1985, that was the new concept.

PAUL: Exactly. Yeah. He was helping me to think ahead like that. And I guess I always carried that forward with me in terms of, well, how can we do this better and what else is out there? And I've just carried that along with me.

PEGGY: That's great. Do you remember who the Presidents or Secretaries of the Interior were during your career?

PAUL: So, yeah, it would have been...I got here at the very end of the Ryan Zinke administration, yeah. And then David Bernhardt and now, I'm blanking on her name...

PEGGY: Oh, Deb Haaland.

PAUL: Secretary Deb Haaland. Yes.

PEGGY: And the Presidents would have been?

PAUL: Trump and Biden.

PEGGY: Did the changes at administration affect your work?

PAUL: Sure. Yes. Even technology. Throughout my career, yes. Because what happens is priorities change and then allocation of money changes. Sometimes it surprises you. Like in the prior administration, when I got here, they had a big priority on launching an electronic permitting system. And that was in the very early discovery stages when I got here. And that consumed a lot of my time and energy and effort. And I built a lot of collaboration with the permit granting programs as we worked through identifying how to do that.

The director at the time, Skipwith was extremely motivated to see that project come to life. And so, we spent a lot of effort on it.

In the current administration, there is I think some of the infrastructure funds have been helpful in terms of modernizing and dealing with what I like to call technical debt, which is deferred maintenance in IT. Yes, yes, and everybody has it, and we sure do. And so that's been an area where I have worked with the directorate and worked with the budgeting committee out of the deputy's group in order to try and secure funds to help deal with those challenges and have been successful in important ways in doing that.

PEGGY: Did you ever feel like you had enough funding to do what you needed to do, or did you always feel like you were a little short?

PAUL: Oh.

PEGGY: There's never enough.

PAUL: There's never. It's inevitable, and it's inevitable in the IT field, as you look around and you see what needs to be done, that you never have enough. And that's not unique to here. I feel it was a victory to have the support of Steve Guertin and the budget office for recognizing that, and the directorate as a whole. I've given them talks on technical debt, and they get it because they understand deferred maintenance.

And so, we had success there. Was it enough? It's a long-term project. You can always use more. I mean, I used to like to say I could spend \$5 million in five minutes, and that would help us for a period of time. But we need more of those five minutes as to...

PEGGY: Now was there ever any discussion of the bureaus and different agencies collaborating on some of our IT resources and trying to build a bigger, better setup?

PAUL: Yeah. There have been initiatives like that. The department pushed a big initiative while I was here, and they're still pushing it. I learned this week to have a common system that we use for helpdesk. And because everybody has their own...when you call the helpdesk or send them an email, they have their own tracking system that they take in the information. And then look for other examples of problem resolution or if it's a unique problem, they write what the resolution is. They have their standard processes and things like that.

So, every bureau has one of those. Most of them are different from each other. And so, the idea here, this originated in the prior administration as well, was buy a centralized product that all of the bureaus adapt in order to do that. And that is still moving ahead. There has been some adoption by other agencies. When I left, Fish and Wildlife was at the point of having recently invested in the current helpdesk ticketing system. So, it's important to get some more years of life out of it before moving into a new system.

PEGGY: It's probably a tough sell for some bureaus, I'm sure.

PAUL: It's a very tough sell for most bureaus. Yes.

PEGGY: A little proprietary.

PAUL: Yes. Exactly. Yes, yes.

PEGGY: Yes. So overall, now that you're retired, what are your thoughts of the Service's future and what advice would you have for new hires, people just coming in?

PAUL: For the future, I think there's so much awareness of the need for conservation and protecting the planet and mitigating the effects of climate change and trying to reduce emissions that there is a long and growing appetite for the type of work that the Service does and can contribute to a broader effort to problem resolution in that regard. And so, it's sort of like growing the mission of the Service, but it's an important part of it. Climate change is an important part of the work that goes on right now. And because

it's so integrally related to habitat and the ability of plants, animals, birds to survive. So, there's always going to be no shortage of work for the Service to do.

For people coming in, most new hires, I think these days, have a lot of technical skills and they just come with more technical skills than people of my generation do. Just partly because technology is so much more all-pervasive and that's only going to continue, it's only gonna grow. And so, it's important that they continue to do that and adopt a way of continually learning and changing and adopting new technologies. I think people who are coming out of school these days do that anyhow, and maybe even look forward to it in ways that is very healthy. I also think another important aspect is to have some have breadth in your interests and your experiences and things like that.

If you're in the Service as a new hire I think it's important, experience headquarters, experience the field and experience a regional office, experience a remote office. I mean, develop breadth from the perspective of program and geography, I think is really important. I mean, I familiarized myself in the first year that I was here by visiting every regional office and a wide variety of field sites, such as field stations, such as refuges, hatcheries, labs to understand the breadth of the Service. And you just realize it's vast. It really is vast.

And it's having worked in a bureaucracy in the same branch, doing the same thing for 12 years when I was an economist, I understand how that can be comfortable, but it's so important to break out of that. And not just try and make your career in one unit, because with each successive experience, successive job, if you will, you become a more valuable employee to the organization for the next one and for yourself and your own enrichment and understanding of problems and how to deal with them.

PEGGY: That's good advice. Was there anything we haven't touched on as far as your career or Fish and Wildlife Service or anything that comes to mind that we haven't talked about?

PAUL: No. I think the thing that is really important for the Service and is really important not only in the IT field is the notion of collaborating effectively across organizational lines. It's hard to do in the best of circumstances. It's harder to do when everybody's really busy and has their own commitments. But on the other hand, you can obviously achieve much greater results and efficiency for the Service by working together.

I hope we've demonstrated that in IRTM with the consolidation, instead of doing things nine different ways with nine different teams, that we've got more efficiency and effectiveness in doing that. It allows you to do more of the interesting things when you standardize the more mundane. But I think that, we all need each other more on a daily basis than 10 or 20 years ago.

And collaborating across those organizational lines and trying to break down the silos is really important. Because when a mandate comes along, such as a director saying you're gonna build this permitting process that is from across all of the permit granting programs, it's not an IT problem to solve. It's everybody's problem to solve.

PEGGY: So, when you talked about that electronic permitting system, you're talking about department wide?

PAUL: No, it's in the Service. This one that we have now it's called ePermits. Yes, yeah. So that's Service-wide. But we would have regular weekly meetings, and it would be me and four other ADs and some of our supporting staff in order to ensure that all of the programs involved were on the same page and we're collaborating effectively. That's hard to do, but we need to do more of it.

PEGGY: Yeah, I'm sure. All right, let's see. Do you know of any other folks that you encountered in your career that maybe we should interview that might be retired or near retirement that you think would be interesting candidates for an interview?

PAUL: From the Service?

PEGGY: Yeah.

PAUL: I'm sure I can think of them.

PEGGY: And if you think of them, you can reach out. I'll be emailing you next week. You can reach out to me.

PAUL: Yeah, sure. Yeah. No, we've had some really stellar people move on.

PEGGY: Yeah, sure.

PAUL: Just because of retirement.

PEGGY: Well, be thinking about that. Okay. Yeah. Anything else before we wrap up or anything come to mind? All right. Well, thank you for taking your time today for this interview.

PAUL: Thank you.

PEGGY: I appreciate it.

End of Interview

Key words: camping, climate change, collaboration, communication, conservation, fishes, international affairs, leadership, management, meetings