The Oral History of Kevin Cobble

March 24, 2017

Interview conducted by John Cornely
Campus of New Mexico State, Las Cruces, New Mexico

Oral History Cover Sheet

Name: Kevin Cobble

Date of Interview: March 24, 2017

Location of Interview: Campus of New Mexico State, Las Cruces, New Mexico

Interviewer: John Cornely

Approximate years worked for Fish and Wildlife Service: Nearly 40 years of Federal Service.

Offices and Field Stations Worked, Positions Held, in chronological order:

Young Adult Conservation Corps member**,** Pinetop, Arizona. One year appointment to work at the Pinetop Fisheries Assistance Office. Started in June 1978.

Started as a temporary appointment, then a Subject to Furlough assignment then finally as a permanent WG-04 Animal Caretaker at Williams Creek National Fish Hatchery (NFH) in Whiteriver, Arizona on the White Mountain Apache Reservation. Williams Creek NFH was part of Alchesay-Williams Creek NFH complex.

Converted from WG-04 to GS 5 Fisheries Biologist at Williams Creek Fish Hatchery. Promoted to GS-7 while at Williams Creek NFH. Williams Creek produced rainbow trout, brook trout, brown trout and the threatened Apache trout for Federal and Tribal lands in Arizona, New Mexico and southern Colorado. Worked as WG/Fisheries Biologist from May 1979 to December 1984

Transferred to Inks Dam National Fish Hatchery in Burnet, Texas and promoted to GS-9 Assistant Hatchery Manager. IDNFH produced channel catfish, largemouth bass and some striped bass for Tribal lands throughout the Southwest. Serves as Assistant Manager from January 1984 to August 1985

Transferred back to Williams Creek National Fish Hatchery as the Unit Leader of the Hatchery. GS-9. Served as Unit Leader from September 1985 to May 1989

Transferred to San Bernardino National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) in Douglas, Arizona as a GS-9 Refuge Manager. Refuge was complexed with Buenos Aires National Wildlife Refuge. Promoted to GS11 and then to GS-12 Refuge Manager. San Bernardino/Leslie Canyon NWR's were managed for Threatened and Endangered species on the Rio Yaqui drainage. Served as RM from June 1989 to May 1999.

Transferred to San Andres National Wildlife Refuge in Las Cruces, New Mexico. GS-12. SANWR was managed for desert bighorn sheep. Served as RM from May 1999 to December 2012

Transferred to Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge in San Antonio, New Mexico. Promoted to GS-13 and then to GS-14 Refuge Manager. Refuge was primarily a waterfowl refuge with greater sandhill cranes and snow geese as key management species. RM from January 2013 to December 2018

Most Important Projects: Raising wild-caught Apache trout; re-introduction of the Yaqui catfish, Yaqui chub and Yaqui topminnow at San Bernardino NWR in Arizona; instituting a prescribed burn program at San Andres NWR to restore habitat for the desert bighorn sheep; increasing mule deer populations at San Andres; controlling salt cedar at San Andres and Bosque del Apache NWRs

Colleagues and Mentors: Wayne Shifflett

Brief Summary of Interview: Kevin talks about growing up in New Mexico and his early conservation experiences including going to Bosque del Apache NWR as a youth. He knew he wanted to work in conservation since he was about 10 years old. Kevin went to New Mexico State in Las Cruces, New Mexico, graduating with a degree in wildlife science in 1978. His career with the Fish and Wildlife Service started in the Fisheries Assistant Office in Pinetop, Arizona. Kevin describes his various jobs in the Service, working at national fish hatcheries in Arizona, New Mexico and Texas and national wildlife refuges in Arizona and New Mexico. He describes working to protect endangered fish at San Bernardino NWR and rebuilding populations of mule deer and desert bighorn sheep at San Andres NWR, which is an overlay of the White Sands Missile Base. Kevin describes workforce planning and the efforts he took to keep San Andres NWR staffed and viable. He then transferred to Bosque del Apache NWR as the refuge manager and describes some of his duties there at a significantly different and larger refuge including more salt cedar control, dealing with reduced budgets, managing water rights, and dealing with staffing changes.

At the time of the interview, Kevin was still an active-duty employee, serving as the manager of the Bosque del Apache NWR. He retired at the end of December 2018.

The Interview

John Cornely: This is John Cornely with the US Fish and Wildlife Service Heritage Committee. As a continuation of our oral histories, I'm here today with Kevin Cobble. We're on the campus of New Mexico State University in Las Cruces on March 24th, 2017.

With that, Kevin, I'd like you to just go ahead and give us a little background on your life growing up and tell us about your career.

Kevin Cobble: I was born May 22nd, 1956. My dad was a mechanical engineering professor. I was born in Delaware, but when I was 6 years old, we moved to Las Cruces and my dad took a job here [in the] engineering department. I grew up, went to local schools, and graduated from Las Cruces High School in 1974. Went to New Mexico State and graduated with a degree in wildlife science in 1978.

John: When you started school here was that what you were interested in or did you, like some of us, have some twists and turns before you …

Kevin: No, I actually knew what I wanted to do [since I was] about, I don't know, 10 or 11 years old. I was in Boy Scouts. My dad was a professor. He did a lot of summer classes all over the [western part of the] country. We didn't have a whole lot of money, so we camped basically all summer long while he was taking classes back then. I was a Boy Scout. We did a lot of camping there. I had a scout leader, actually a colonel in the military. He'd been in Panama. He was a big birder. He took me and another scout up to Bosque del Apache [NWR.] It was the first time I'd ever been to a refuge, and he got me into birding a little bit. I'm still not a very good birder, but I developed the interest. Between those two things, it kind of sparked [my interest] and I knew this is what I wanted to do. I was pretty lucky in that and even luckier in that I was able to get in and pursue a career in the Service.

At New Mexico State, your degree - once you graduated – under the federal system you qualified as a wildlife biologist, fisheries biologist, and range conservation. It was kind of handy. There were not a whole lot of job prospects in '78 and then the way the system worked was pretty tough. The Civil Service system was really hard to get in. It's actually a lot better now.

John: Yeah, it's better, but when you were trying to get in, [it] was about the same time I was trying to get in because I spent 4 years in the military and then went to graduate school. 1978 was when I started with the Fish and Wildlife Service.

Kevin: Yeah. When they opened up the register – I remember the biotech [register] was full of Ph.D.'s and stuff. No way I'd get on.

At that time, there wasn't a whole lot of prospects at the Game and Fish Department locally. They hired 1 or 2, but it was really tough to get in with them. I was thinking about going to graduate school. Then one of my professors told me about the Young Adult Conservation Corps. I thought well*, I didn't have a whole lot of field experience or anything,* so I signed up for it. It's funny, there were probably 30 people that came out to hear about it and when they found that it only paid minimum wage, they said, *well, I didn't go to college to get paid that*. Well, 3 of us had pursued appointments with it and we all ended up getting a job with either the Fish and Wildlife Service or Game and Fish. So, it worked out great.

I went to Pinetop, Arizona, the Fisheries Assistance Office there. I did a lot of work on the Indian reservation, primarily the White Mountain Apache Reservation. I stayed there for almost a year. The Williams Creek National Fish Hatchery was there as well. I did a little work out there. Not that he remembered me, I don't think, but the unit leader at Williams Creek had been my graduate assistant when I was there at New Mexico State. They had a position open up and I applied for it, and I got into animal care, a WG-04 animal caretaker.

It was temporary, [starting] in May of '79, and then I worked for about 6 months, and they were trying to figure out how to get me on permanent. I got on the animal caretaker register out of Phoenix which was a lot less competitive than the Federal Register out in San Francisco for biologist jobs. I put in for it and I ended up getting the highest qualified, I guess. I got that and they converted me to a permanent position. I was there for about a year and then they transitioned me. I got converted to a fisheries biologist.

While I was there, at [Williams Creek National Fish Hatchery] an inland trout hatchery, one of the things we started while I was working there, we started raising Apache trout (unintelligible.) It's a threatened species. Never been really raised in captivity. We were looking at that to replace rainbow trout on the reservation and restore its habitat.

John: Get rid of the exotics and put the endemics back into…

Kevin: Yeah, beautiful fish. So, I was there and then I was recruited by the fisheries chief, George Divine at the time. He told me it would be good for my career if I moved to Inks Dam National Fish Hatchery. Being from New Mexico, I wasn't a real big fan of Texas. So, I was like, *okay*. I'd been married. We had a month-old daughter when we moved to Texas. I went there as the assistant manager. It's a catfish and bass hatchery.

I had been at Williams Creek. I moved to Inks Dam and worked there for a year and a half. It was an interesting experience. The manager there was an old-time Texas hatchery manager who had been with the Service for 40 years. Not real keen on new ideas.

John: Is that on the Rio Grande?

Kevin: It's on the Colorado River. It's just kind of northwest of Austin, in a bedroom community of Austin. I was there a little over a year and a half and then had the opportunity to come back to Williams Creek as the unit leader. It was just a lateral. I took that. We were ready to get out of Texas and get back to Arizona. (unintelligible)

A friend of mine, a guy I had first worked for, Ben Robertson**,** was a fisheries biologist in the Fisheries Assistance Office. Because of downsizing and stuff in fisheries, he ended up becoming the refuge manager at San Bernardino Wildlife Refuge in Douglas, Arizona. He was training for his law enforcement [commission.] He unfortunately had a heart attack and died. I think he was 42. He's on the wall at NCTC. Great guy. When he passed away, that was a fish refuge, so I put in for the job. I was a GS-9. He was a GS-9/11. Personnel said that I was not qualified for the job. I had a wildlife degree and not a fisheries degree. [The Albuquerque Region 2 Personnel Office said I did not qualify with a wildlife science degree despite years working as a fisheries biologist. It was incredibly difficult at that time to move from Fisheries into Refuges.]

So, I argued with them. They weren't convinced. I called George Divine and talked to him. He went down as Chief of Fisheries and talked to them and kind of pointed out some stuff. Then they said *okay, you're qualified as a 9, but not as an 11*. My understanding that there were some other things that went on. I wasn't the manager's first choice, but I ended up [getting the job.] They decided a fish biologist would be

the best, because that's what the first manager had been. He was a fish biologist. I got into Refuges. I had some help from some people, which it's kind of who you know, sometimes, I think.

John: Yeah, yeah. There're all kinds of…and usually it's not that you're not qualified, it's just technicalities.

Kevin: That's what it was. I had all the qualifications, and I think I was a good employee.

John: San Bernardino, what is the fish connection then?

Kevin: It's kind of the northern, just a little bit of the Rio Yaqui drainage. Its primarily in Mexico, but what was in the US, it was historically part of Texas John Slaughter's ranch.

John: I remember Texas John Slaughter.

Kevin: He was a famous lawman back in Tombstone and all that, but it had some unique springs and artesian aquifer there. It had the Yaqui chub, which is an endangered fish, and it was found nowhere else but on the refuge. The Yaqui topminnow was about the same way. There is a total of 6 different fish species that were either endangered or threatened that were part of that drainage. The purpose of the refuge - the Service had acquired it in 1982 – was to restore the habitat and protect the fishes.

I moved to Douglas, Arizona in '89. I was there for 10 years. We did a lot of work in Mexico both on native trout and the native fishes of the Rio Yaqui. We surveyed a lot of areas finding fish populations, then we brought Yaqui catfish back into the US. We re-introduced it onto the refuge. And beautiful shiners. We re-introduced both those back to the refuge. We brought Yaqui suckers in. They were being held at Dexter. I transferred and I don't think those ever got re-introduced. I think that something happened to them. They were fairly abundant in Mexico anyway.

Then they had numerous other species that got listed as I was there. When I left, there was probably 9 to 10 threatened and endangered species that we were trying to manage there. Neat. Southern Arizona. Leslie Canyon National Wildlife Refuge was a satellite. They separated it and then we still managed it. It was a satellite to Buenos Aires Refuge. Wayne Shifflett was my supervisor, which was really nice 'cause I didn't have the refuge experience that he did. He had 30 plus years or so. I learned an awful lot from Wayne. I owe him a lot.

John: He's a person that [I'd like to interview.] Do you know if he's still around down there someplace 'cause I want to put him on my candidate list.

Kevin: The last I'd heard or seen anything from him he'd moved. He had a place in Virginia on the Shenandoah River, I think. He was leading birding tours to Africa for a while.

John: Okay. Well, I'm going to have to try and see if I can find him. I knew him from some committees and stuff. They were biological-related stuff that we were on a taskforce or something together. He's an interesting guy.

Kevin: Yeah, yeah. Wayne, he was a good mentor. He was always on the edge, but he was…

John: Yeah. Yeah. He was, as they say, a little different kind of a manager, at times. Good guy.

Kevin: But he was always there for me, I mean. He was a little suspicious when I got there but we ended up working pretty well together. (*Laughter).* I owe a lot to him.

I had originally told my wife - I mean we'd been up in the pine trees and everything and Douglas was right on the border. Of course, we got there and then right after within a year or two after we got there, during that time, I guess NAFTA (North American Free Trade Act) went through and then the number of people moving up from Mexico just skyrocketed. Border Patrol would catch a couple hundred people a month if they were lucky and then it went to [where] they were getting 1,000 a day. That really impacted the refuge a lot. We had a lot of drug traffic coming across. When I left, we were picking up loads of marijuana almost every day, 2 to 3 hundred pounds a day. You couldn't walk in any direction without [running into it.]

Anyway, I'd originally gone to San Bernardino with the intent of working a couple of years to get some experience and then going somewhere else. After 10 years, it was kind of like, *okay, I think it's time to move on.* I'd say, I learned a lot. It ended up, near the end, it was primarily me and my maintenance man who also had law enforcement. We were spending most of our time on law enforcement and not much else. Those two refuges are some of the neatest places that I've ever been on. I mean they were fascinating biologically and just a great place to work.

I put in for several jobs. I was hoping to go to Arapaho Refuge, but they kind of took their time on that. It took them like 6 months before they interviewed anybody and, in the meantime, San Andres [NWR] opened up. I put in for it and they called me and interviewed and offered me the job.

John: What year was that?

Kevin: That was in '99. I moved here in May of '99. Like I say, I grew up here. I always knew that San Andres was there, never been there. It was kind of exciting to get here and try again. I'd known a lot of people that worked here. I followed Gary Montoya**.** He had been the manager before me. At the time, I had a biologist, Mara [Wiesenberger] and a clerk. I think she was full-time.

John: Your biologist was the person that just went to work for BLM recently, is that the person?

Kevin: Yeah.

John: We were trying to get her lined up for an interview.

Kevin: Yeah, she's really good. She was the first biologist and really the only one. She'd been there since '92, I think. She'd been there 20 years.

John: Gary said that she was a really good biologist. I'm going to put her on my list and maybe we'll get our schedules sometime and…

Kevin: Yeah. She could give you a lot of insight of stuff, particularly the sheep.

When I got to San Andres, at the time, it was a bighorn sheep refuge. When I got there, we had one female, an ewe, that was still alive. They had had scabies in the '80s and then over time, the population had just declined. It got down to one, primarily because nobody wanted to put any sheep back in because of the scabies. They had tried all kinds of treatments. They moved some of them to a captive facility that the Game and Fish had outside of Lordsburg, New Mexico. They had a population of them.

John: Is that the Red Rocks area or is that a different…

Kevin: It's called Red Rock, but it's up off the Gila River.

John: Okay. I think I've been by it.

Kevin: Yeah. They brought in exotic game animals to release there.

John: I remember that.

Kevin: That was kind of ironic, because some of the oryx that we had problems with were originally brought in there. We had one sheep when I first got here. We did the first prescribed burn they ever did. That was about a month after I got here. That was a nightmare to try and pull off. It's kind of interesting - when we finally got it, we had probably 110 firefighters on everything. By the time I left, we were doing the burns with 10 people. At the time, nobody really wanted us to burn, I guess. We finally got the okay, so we ran with it. We burned several thousand acres. We're looking at footprint of about 10,000 acres. We got a couple thousand that didn't burn, just conditions weren't quite right.

John: Where abouts did you first burn?

Kevin: That was on Black Brushy Mountain. It was Little San Nicolas Camp. It was some of the best sheep habitat on Bennett Mountain. The refuge is a series of basically 5 peaks within the San Andres range. The southernmost is Bennett and Black Brushy. San Andres Peak is the second highest point in the mountain range and then Oñate and Block.

San Andres range is about 75 miles long [and] totally within White Sands Missile Range which is the testing base that's about 2 to 3 million acres. It's pretty isolated; not very many troops on it. It's mostly just military testing. We basically had run of the whole mountain range, which was pretty neat.

We got the burn off. It hadn't burned in 70 to 80 years. We needed to get the habitat back in better shape. We were pretty aggressive on that. In the 13 years while I was there, we put fire on every square inch of the refuge pretty much. I'd say 10 to 20,000-acre plots that we did. We had some pretty good changes there. I thought that things came out pretty well. First couple times I did it, I was pretty nervous, not having burned much before. I did a lot at Buenos Aires, but you worry that nothing's going to come up till it rains and then it's like, *oh, okay*.

John: I was the fire management officer for a few different refuges before we had professional fire people because I had a prescribed fire background from Texas Tech. I had a minor in range and most of that was fire ecology. They'd made me a fire management officer. I said, "I learned how to set them, I didn't learn how to put them out." *(Laughter).*

Kevin: Yeah, it was pretty easy. We had to camp out there while we were doing it. We would bring in some folks from Bosque del Apache that were kind of like cooks, and they would cook for all the fire crew and did a lot of work out of helicopters.

John: Did you have pretty much Fish and Wildlife Service fire crews?

Kevin: A lot. In the end it was pretty much, but throughout that we would bring in BLM, Park Service and White Sands Missile Range. We tried to bring in as many people as we could to get experience.

The neat thing about it, San Andres everything is either straight up or down. There is no flat territory on it. Its' isolation makes it so great. Then each of those mountain peaks is intersected by a canyon usually. Usually, you have permanent water in it. It is a fairly well watered Chihuahuan desert ecosystem. Ash Canyon is just incredible; the stuff to see right there. We did that. We were also working on [increasing

the population of sheep.] It's kind of hard to be a bighorn sheep refuge with only one bighorn sheep. So, we got with Game and Fish, and they brought in - you might call them "sentinel rams", I guess. We brought in 6 rams. We put satellite collars on them, which of course back then the satellite [collar] was pretty hard on the sheep I think in some ways.

We put the sheep throughout the mountain range and the thought being that being rams, they would lead us to any females. We could see if there were sheep that we'd missed on our surveys; that there was more than the one we knew about. She had a radio collar. She had been captured in '97, I think. She showed signs of scabies, but there was like 1 or 2 other sheep then. Before we put the sheep in, we had made a captive facility up at San Nicolas Camp up by Black Brushy. We caught her, brought her in, put her in there and the first thing she did was run into the chain link [fence]. She just about broke her neck on the chain links. We had to put fiber cloth around the edging. She could see through it, and we had to do that. Broke off one of her horns.

John: I helped trap desert bighorns in Joshua Tree. We had to use a nylon net corral because they're going to go get it. Then we'd have to crawl under it, grab them and blindfold them. We were putting radio collars on them and then turning them loose.

Kevin: Yeah. The thought was we were going to hold her because she had tested positive for scabies. We were going to hold her and treat her. You have to treat them several times to get the scabies out.

John: So, you can treat them.

Kevin: You can. Yeah. We just thought that being she was the only one left, but she still has it. Well, then we got the test back and she was scabies-free! So, we turned her loose. We brought in these 6 rams and put them out. Then over 2 years, we would capture them through Game and Fish, and we'd go out and capture those rams and see if they had anything with them and then see if they found other sheep and then just see their movements. We never found any other sheep. When it came to be breeding season, it was amazing how many of them moved down and found that ewe from 70 miles away.

John: Wow.

Kevin: Then during the mating season, she ended up getting her other horn busted off. At that time, I think she was 12 years old. She was pretty old for a sheep. She ended up having a lamb. She had several lambs. She was finally killed by – she had a broken leg. We're not sure if she broke her leg and then was killed by a lion or the lion killed her. She ended up being killed by a lion, but her genes are still in there, I guess.

John: Okay, yeah. She had lambs for several years at that age.

Kevin: Yeah, she had three. I mean for a herd animal living by itself for about 6 years, it was pretty incredible. We ended up doing a lot of negotiation. We made a deal with the Game and Fish Department. We ended up going to Kofa Refuge. They were supposed to give us I think it was 60 sheep. The first time they gave us 30. We tried to get mostly females. Then we trucked them back there.

Of course, that was a trick. You're up all day and then you drive all night. We had a diesel fuel tank in the back of our 1-ton to pull the trailer. We got outside of Yuma, and we discovered the thing was leaking fuel and blowing fuel back. We didn't have anything really to fix it, so we had to find [a way to get rid of the fuel.] There was a truck driver pulled in - we were in the rest stop. We basically asked him if he wanted free fuel, because we had to drain it. It would have killed all those sheep.

John: Right.

Kevin: So, we gave it to him. He was pretty happy to take about 100 gallons of free government fuel. (*Laughter).* Then we got back here. Well then, the problem was we were at the compound. We kept them there, overnight, or the rest of the night. We drove all night. Then we had to wait for the test results because we couldn't release them in New Mexico if they had like Johne's disease or some of these other ones. We were pretty sure they were clean, but nobody had really answered my questions, like, *if we can't release them, what happens to them?*

Luckily, they came back clean. We got the okay to turn them loose and we turned them loose. Oh, and Game and Fish brought over another 20 or so, maybe 30, from their Red Rock facility in New Mexico. The idea was bring in the Kofa sheep because the New Mexico sheep were not very diverse. We were trying …

John: Trying to increase genetic diversity.

Kevin: … the diversity and [reduce] the inbreeding. The San Andres herd had been through several low population numbers. We think that might have been why they were so susceptible to scabies and some of the other things. We turned them loose. Part of the deal on that was that we had to agree that we would do lion control, because Game and Fish was convinced that we would be aggregating …

John: Feeding the lions.

Kevin: … the sheep and the mountain lions. Of course, San Andres had had a 10-year lion study on it. We were pretty confident, but it was pretty controversial. It was kind of controversial within my staff, but we figured we could suppress the lion population until the sheep got up [in high enough numbers] and then the lion [suppression could be modified to just offending the lions.] We're not going to eliminate the lions. We went after it. It was a Game and Fish contractor that did the lion killing.

John: I know that there's some people who think we still ought to be controlling all the predators out there. My first job was at Malheur. I wondered why they were hiring a predator person for a migratory bird refuge till I got there and found that they had high nest predation issues and some on the female ducks and geese and cranes. Plus, they wanted to start some prescribed burning. So, once I got there, it made sense why they were interested in me. What we did was kind of a similar thing. We said, *well, we're going to do predator control for 3 years.* Some of these – especially - we weren't worried about the ducks; we weren't worried about the Canada geese. We were worried about the cranes, and we thought they're long-lived birds. We just need to get some recruitment. We weren't getting any recruitment. Then we won't have to do this all the time, and that's what they did.

Kevin: That was kind of the same thought I had. We did it. The lion guy they hired; we were doing leg snares on them. They wanted a 48-hour trap check. We told them 24 hours. They were paying this guy $2,400 bucks a lion.

John: Wow.

Kevin: When we told them they had to do a 24-hour trap check, they asked him if he would, so he just doubled the price.

John: Just doubled the price.

Kevin: They were paying him $5000 bucks a lion almost. He ended up getting probably about 30 lions out of the range. The Game and Fish wanted him to go everywhere; we tried to get him to concentrate on the lions that were close to the sheep. My theory was that's where the likelihood is, and we lost some sheep. We lost a fair number of sheep to lions. We caught most of the lions, but I'd say it was just a constant battle on everything. I've never had in all my years of dealing with other agencies, I never had that prolonged a battle. There is something about bighorn sheep biologists that they're all right, everybody else is wrong and you should be doing exactly what they say. It was just crazy. I mean, the passion was great, but it wore after a while.

Like I say, we continued our burn program. We were looking at it from the habitat side that we needed to improve the habitat. Then the sheep, they did okay. We got a few more sheep from Kofa. I think we were able to go back and get another 10 or 15, but then we couldn't get the rest of them because the population at Kofa had crashed. They weren't sure, they were blaming the lions for that one too. They were scrambling on that. So, we lost that, and to get any more sheep, the Game and Fish Department was saying that White Sands Missile Range would have to do lion control over all of their part too. By that time, White Sands were like, *well, the population is doing okay*. They were looking at it too and it was - just taking random lions out is probably not [productive.] *Your trapper is not going to go over this whole area anyway, so why do you care? Why not just target them?* They were kind of on their own for that.

John: I don't know that much about lions, but with coyotes, which I know well, why you can trap a bazillion of them and if you don't get the right ones, your problem continues. I suspect that's somewhat true with lions, bobcats and everything else.

Kevin: I think there were some lions that never messed with the sheep. The other lions, who knows? We were working on that.

One of the other problems we had was the drought. The mule deer population up there, back in '50s and '60s, I think they were taking a thousand mule deer off that refuge a year. I mean, it was incredible numbers. When I got there, you were lucky to see a deer and going up in the Organ Mountains, which were just south, you couldn't walk out a day without seeing 30 to 40 deer. We started a big [research study]. Then they found chronic wasting disease on the post. So, we started studying the deer population; what's going on there.

Then with that, there was Gemsbok - oryx - that had been released by the Game Department as game animals. You had to pay $1,500 bucks I think was a permit for out of state [hunters]. It was very popular. Really good to eat, good to hunt. We were getting overrun with them. At the same time, we started removing them. We had to bring in hunters, but we would escort them in and shoot them. We started taking 50 to 60 animals out a year. We worked at it for 6 or 7 years. We finally got it downward. Before, if you went out there, all the agaves were broken off where they were feeding on the stalks. We weren't getting much agave production. It looked like cows had been all over. We watched them; they would push bighorn sheep off their beds, getting bighorn sheep out. They weren't supposed to go that high. They never read the rule book. We were knee deep [in oryx.]

And then, on the springs, we had salt cedar, which is an invasive plant. We were cleaning up the springs, burning the habitat, getting rid of oryx. I don't have a scientific, but just from observation and anecdotally, the harder we reduced the oryx population, we started seeing more and more deer. It might have been coincidental, but I don't think it was. I think there was something in the oryx that was pushing them out.

John: I think they're more of a grazer than deer, but it might be aggressive interactions too. I think they can be pretty aggressive, I understand.

Kevin: Yeah, and nothing eats them, so they had almost 100% calf survival. Really the only way to get rid of them was hunting them. So, we hunted them hard. It was hard on the staff. Spent a lot of time, because being on a closed military base, we had to escort them in. That was it. We got pretty good at it. We got where we learned pretty quickly that we couldn't give people 2 days to hunt, because they would look for trophy animals and we'd be out there most of the day. We limited them to one day and told them, *you better shoot the first one you see because you might not see another one.* We had about a 96% success rate.

John: Can't beat that.

Kevin: Yeah, it was really pretty good. I saw more of the refuge that way chasing oryx or wounded oryx. *(Laughter).* It was great, I learned the refuge certainly better than I would've otherwise. So, between chasing sheep or finding dead sheep and going after oryx, we pretty much walked the whole refuge.

We've also been able to expand a little bit. We'd gotten a maintenance worker in 2001, I guess. I've got to get my numbers right here. We actually ended up with staff of four, and that was a big help. We did a lot of work on some of the infrastructure up there and stuff.

John: Is the refuge a satellite?

Kevin: No, it was standalone. Historically, it's been under Bosque, but then they broke it out. So, it was a standalone refuge. I stayed there at San Bernardino, I had the opportunity to go other places, but I liked working on a small staff. I liked the fact that I got to do everything. It was pretty fun. You know, I was one day a maintenance guy, one day a firefighter.

John: Just like the old-time refuge managers.

Kevin: Oh yeah, yeah. It kind of kills me in some ways, I understand the reasoning, but it kind of kills me seeing the specialized law enforcement at San Bernardino. Of course, we're kind of going back the other way in fire. Firefighters were getting accustomed to it and now they're wanting all the refuge people to get collateral duty so that we can fill in on stuff. I mean, I think that's a good thing. It's a great thing. I always sent my young staff on fire assignments as something they needed to do.

John: It's a really good experience even if they don't use it continuously. Why, I think it's an excellent experience in a whole bunch of different ways.

Kevin: Yeah. Anyway, we got the oryx population under control. We opened up some hunting areas for White Sands on their trophy hunts to try and help put the pressure on. We worked a lot with our strike teams and stuff. Not only on the refuge, we took care of salt cedar, but we started working on the whole mountain range.

John: I was going to ask you about how the salt cedar control was going.

Kevin: That was going pretty good. Once you get it out, it's pretty easy to control if you spend a little time on it.

John: Keep on it. When I was at Joshua Tree, we had salt cedar issues, and I know I spent a lot of time at Bosque. I know what they've gone through and what you're still going through up there. You've made a lot of progress.

Kevin: Yeah. Then the sheep population was coming up just not as fast as would've liked, but we got up to - depending on the estimates, because you could never know – but when I left, there was between 90 and 120 sheep. I think in the last year or so they had over 170 sheep or something. It was one of the highest population numbers they'd seen there. It's a good thing. They're spreading out and moving off the mountain range. You couldn't plan too much on there because they were always testing and that was always first. We'd get locked out an awful lot, so you had to be pretty flexible on things. Luckily, we could go in through NASA. They had a test facility there; we could go in on the west side of the mountains and sneak in. Even though we weren't supposed to be there, we did an awful lot of work in there anyway.

It was kind of cool. Right in the late, around 2010, that area in there we started picking up elk on our cameras. They were colonizing from the north. We had a young bull show up and then when one of the biologists was out one day, she saw a black bear on the refuge. Now I think they've got 5 or 10 resident bears in there now. It's kind of neat seeing the colonization of some of these species that hadn't been there.

John: Wonder if some of that had to do with the habitat manipulation as well?

Kevin: Yeah, I think so. I think we were starting to work with White Sands and start doing prescribed burns on their lands [with] our fire guys. We were able to convince their fire chief to back off and not put out everything. Move to the more defensible areas and let it burn. The thing was, it was real tough burning there 'cause we would have to pick - the best time to burn would've been mid to late June right before the monsoon season started – but because of the testing going on and these guys were paying millions of dollars a day to test and they had Japanese, the Israelis - that was always primary. We would have to try and schedule it - they had flex schedules so most of them had a Friday off, every other Friday off. We'd have to schedule [the burn] on their [time]. We would try to catch it like on Memorial Day weekend so that we could get a 4-day window to burn on. We just had to go with what the weather was. A lot of times, we'd get in these fronts that would raise the humidity up and just wreak havoc on a burn, but we had to do all these 10 to 12,000-acre burns in 2 to 3 days.

John: When I was at Western Oregon Refuges, we were in a smoke management district. We had much smaller burns, I mean we were talking about Canada goose wintering area grass fields basically, which you had to ring-fire it. They told you when to start it and when it had to be out by. The weather - they would call you up. You didn't know because they were waiting for some of the smoke to go straight up and they had Interstate 10 sitting there, so you'd have to worry about that. Of course, when you do a ring-fire, you're virtually guaranteed to have a fire whorl come off a corner someplace. We got pretty good at knowing when that was going to be and have a pumper sitting there. It would be tough. I can understand.

Kevin: Yeah. Then I guess probably in the mid-2000s or somewhere in there, our budgets started going down. We started getting pressure on those. We had workforce planning and of course being on a closed military base with no visitation or very limited, when they were making those decisions, the region came out with Tier 1 and Tier 2 and Tier 3 refuges - Tier 1 being the ones we would fund, Tier 2 would make do, and then Tier 3, we would [reduce staff to either a one-person station or have no staff and be covered by one of the bigger refuges like Bosque del Apache.] When they first published the list that came out, they accidentally had us on Tier 3, which didn't go over real well with the staff. They moved us up to Tier 2, but its kind like, *oh, well, okay, I can see where this can go eventually*.

At the time they made the decision, I was working with a lot of the different groups in here that were trying to restore the river in the southern part of New Mexico. We made the decision like okay, the International Boundary and Water Commission and New Mexico State Parks - the State Parks had bought this parcel of land, but they couldn't manage it. We talked to them and got a management agreement with

them where we would manage it. Then we got various funds to go in there and take out all the salt cedar off it. It's called Broad Canyon. We spent about 2 years cleaning it up and taking all the salt cedar out and replanting with willow and cottonwoods. It looks really nice now.

That led to contracts with the International Boundary and Water Commission who was under a management agreement with ES (FWS Ecological Services) on southwestern willow flycatcher, an endangered bird. They had to restore habitat within their 90 miles of river from Caballo Dam down to El Paso. They had to restore habitat for the willow flycatcher. We were able to get a contract with them. In those lean budget years, that's what saved us. It was nice because we could work on that mostly in the wintertime and we had to be out April 15th and all summer. So then, we would spend more time in the refuge there. It worked out pretty well.

They're still doing work on the river. We ended up restoring quite a bit of habitat. Then we got in with Partners [for Fish and Wildlife.] We started doing Partners projects. The thought being that if we established a constituency, the same work we're doing, that they will advocate for us at some point. It worked pretty well. We got a lot of stuff done and that's kind of neat.

It's getting toward the end of my career, and it was like, I could've stayed there, I was happy there, but it was like, *ah, I think I need a new challenge.* One day, when Bosque del Apache came open, I put in for it. I was lucky enough to get the job there. I've been there for the last 4 or 5 years. I think I got there in 2013. That has been a unique challenge in itself.

John: Very different kind of a situation than down here with all the people and all the volunteers and everything.

Kevin: I thought I worked hard here. (*Laughter).* We worked our butts off. Everybody in the Service does that. The amazing thing to me is I've come across very few lazy people that work for the Fish and Wildlife Service, particularly in refuges. But when I got to Bosque del Apache, the workload is just magnitudes greater than anything else I'd ever seen. There was always something going on. It was just incredible. I said I wanted a challenge and boy it's been a lot of neat stuff going on there with invasives, restoration, trying to reduce our power. That was one thing we did here too [at San Andres NWR.] I've always been interested in, through my dad, solar energy and that sort of stuff. While I was here, we were able to scrape enough money together through various sources that we covered up the refuge office complex in solar. The last years I was there, we weren't paying any electric bills. In fact, the utility was paying the refuge for the power we produced. Then we were looking at other efficiencies as well.

John: Are you able to do that at Bosque?

Kevin: There was a lot that was done when the Obama administration first came in. They did the stimulus [bill.] They got quite a bit there. The Friends group just bought us a 5 kilowatts system to run the sewage treatment plant. We're trying. We've been spending a lot of time trying to switch everything to LED lights to reduce our demand.

Our budgets are getting squeezed again and that's two of the big budget items at Bosque del Apache because we're high public use. We're vested water from the San Antonio, so we were paying for every gallon. We're trying to cut back because we get leaks and stuff. We could potentially be paying $30,000 a year in water bills and the same with electricity because of the size of the facility. I figure that's my discretionary money in the future, if I can cut those down.

John: You can save some money there.

Kevin: Plus, it's the right thing to do. Like I say, I've been in the Service now, it'll be 38 years in May.

John: Wow. How much longer are you going to hang in there do you think?

Kevin: My wife and I are having discussions on that. *(Laughter).* Probably, I don't know - probably another year. There are a few more things I'd like to finish. We're doing a project on what we call the managed floodplain which is where all our moist soil units and everything are. [The managed floodplain was all the area that had been cleared and turned into moist soil management units. The active floodplain has the Rio Grande in it. This area wasn't managed very intensively with mostly salt cedar control projects when funding could be found.]

Phil Norton and John Taylor started it back when they were there. We've pretty much got all the salt cedar – the major things of salt cedar are all on the management units. The river and the active flood plain has still got a lot. We had a wildfire there last July. We started working on it when I first got there and then this wildfire actually burned in the heart of the salt cedar on the south end. We got some BAER - burned area[emergency] rehab - money. We're going in there and we're kind of racing the clock right now. We're taking out all the salt cedar, piling it, burning it. The hope is that if the snowpack holds out, we're supposed to get 4,000 to 5,000 cfs (cubic feet per second) coming down. That part of the river over banks at about 3,000 cfs. If we can get all the salt cedar cleared out, get overbanking, it'll all come back in natives, and we won't have to do anything else. It'll save us a major amount of work.

The burn was about 800 acres. We're trying to do 300 to 400 acres before the river runs out. Then get the rest of it someday. [Note: the project was completed in 2018 with the removal of all the salt cedar.]

Like I say, back when I worked at San Bernardino and going to Mexico, we always used to have to hire a Mexican biologist as part of our permit. They were out of Hermosillo, so we always had to pay for their bus fare to Douglas and then we would provide them transportation. We would feed them, do everything with them and then we'd pay their bus fare back to Hermosillo. Great guys, but I wish I'd have taken picture of it. I remember one night we'd been doing field work and they're in camp and here's this Mexican biologist. He's sitting on a stump or a rock right next to the fire. He's got this little field notebook that's worn. He's got this little stubby pencil that he has to kind of shave with a knife to get the lead. He's writing, by the light of the fire, he's writing his field notes. Then just kind of back about 10 yards from him, there is a brand-new pickup truck with an Arizona Game and Fish biologist with the tailgate down, sitting on a table with a modern lantern putting his field notes in on a laptop.

It's like, there's no difference in the abilities or anything of those biologists. It's just what a little bit of different resources were. From then on, I was like, *I'll always be better off than that Mexican biologist when it comes to the tools I have to work with*. It's kind of like; I've never really complained about my budget.

John: No. I went on a couple of the [Department of the] Interior exchanges to China. Then I went to Siberia actually on an International Crane Foundation grant, but the Service agreed to bless the trip so we could go on with Fish and Wildlife travel passports and stuff. The lack of funding, the lack of equipment - both trips to China we visited multiple nature reserves. The managers and the biologists – and they had nothing, yet they were dedicated, passionate people just like we were out there working hard day in and day out.

I was sitting at NCTC training one time and this could've been a refuge manager, but it happened to be a fish hatchery manager looking around at the wonderful facility and saying, "Why, I wish I had that money in my budget instead of building this training facility." I said, "Well, first place, if that money hadn't gone into NCTC, it would have been building bridges or something in West Virginia." Senator Byrd had

control of that money, so, it wouldn't have gone [to a hatchery.] I think he might have even been in New Mexico, but he was a fish hatchery manager somewhere. Then I thought to myself, *I'd like to be able to take every refuge manager, every hatchery manager on one of these trips to one of those places, whether Mexico - anywhere where they'd see what kind of conditions these other people have to operate.*

I'm the say way. Sure, our budgets have never been good and we're getting tough times again here. But everything is relative. We're still in the upper somewhere around the world and it's not that you shouldn't keep fighting for more, because you should.

Kevin: Because you can always do more. The good thing, what I've seen is like I think it's allowed us to focus and give us opportunities to look at stuff that we never would've touched before. Well, actually I think in some ways we've become more efficient because we use our staff better, I think. I say I wanted a new challenge, besides all the challenges of water rights and everything, we're at the end of the ditch and all that and living in a drought-stricken state and trying to fill moist soil units farm program.

Then the staff changed when I got there, we just had a lot of people that got - they were good and then they got promoted or offered jobs somewhere else. Of course, we couldn't fill a lot of those jobs and that was [hard]. We finally got back up to our new strength and then I'm looking at say within a year, I got – well, my maintenance guys have been there for 30 years - they are great. They're about to retire. In fact, if you want to talk to them, they're Dennis Vicente and Calvin Reeves at Bosque. They have so much knowledge of the area, it's scary.

John: We need to do that. Send me some names. Laurie has all my contact information. She has my email and everything. I put together a spreadsheet of candidates. One of the reasons I really wanted to come down here is 'cause we're really short on maintenance people. As you know, more often than not they spent their entire life in that area. They know more about some of these refuges than anybody else does. My philosophy is to get a cross-section of everybody because we don't get the work done without the whole family.

Kevin: I mean Phil Norton and John Taylor had the vision. These are the guys that made it. I have so much respect for the maintenance guys in the Service. They're so great and I've seen a lot of our maintenance guys that are actually better than the biologists. They just have the knowledge [of the land from being out there all the time.]

John: Well, this has been great. I appreciate you taking the time. I know how busy you are. You've accomplished my objectives in talking to you. I think this is important to get your experience and other peoples' experience down and have it there, archived for anyone. We're trying to figure out more active ways to use it rather than just say, *oh yeah there's transcripts here if you want to come read them.*

Kevin: Yeah, so the cool thing is that like at San Andres, I've been to some small out of the way refuges. A lot of people went *why would you go there?* Every refuge I've been to is, there's always, even if it's in the most god-forsaken looking country, there is something just really cool about them. They're really neat. It speaks to the vision of people that came before us on why this would be a good refuge.

Like I say, San Bernardino, San Andres - they're out of the way, they're closed to the public, but they're fantastic refuges and great wildlife habitat.

John: Well, thank you very much. Appreciate it.

End of Interview

Key words: diseases, endangered and/or threatened species, fish hatcheries, fisheries management, fishes, game management, habitat restoration, hiring, hunting, indigenous species, invasive species, law enforcement, maintenance, mammals, partnerships, population control, predator control, prescribed burning, riparian areas, species reintroduction, wage grade employees (USFWS), water management, wildlife refuges