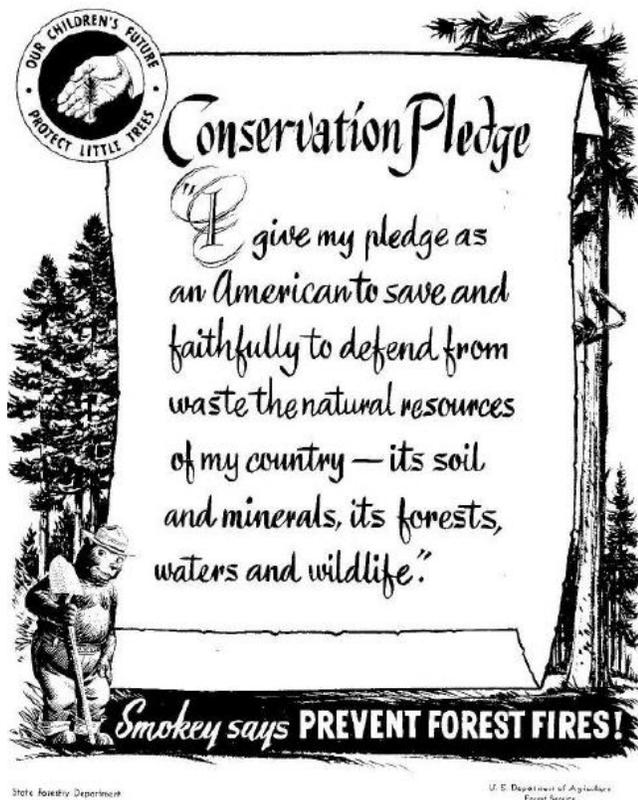


Conservation pledge gives greater meaning to wilderness

by Doug Newbould



I'm not sure when or how it happened, if there was a seminal moment in my life, or maybe it was a learning process that occurred over a period of years, or perhaps it was my destiny. But somewhere along the trail of my childhood, I decided I loved nature. I loved being outdoors—escaping the confines of four walls (any four walls) and heading out “into the great wide-open,” as the Tom Petty song goes.

You know how it feels when you step through a doorway into the fresh air, and you naturally take a deep breath, and then there's the soft sigh of satisfaction? I find myself doing that all the time.

I'm not sure if it happened as a 3-year-old, when my parents pulled up the family roots out of that deep, rich, black Illinois loam and moved to Colorado. Or if it happened at the age of 8, when in search of work, Dad moved us back to southern Illinois.

Perhaps it was the great sense of loss I felt then—leaving a cabin on the Big Thompson River in the heart

of the Rockies. I can still smell that river and hear its song. I can still see the lush meadows of Estes Park ringed with a halo of shimmering gold—the quakies which seemed to endlessly tremble of their own volition. I can still feel the sense of awe and smallness I felt looking west across that beautiful landscape, nestled beneath the high peaks of Rocky Mountain National Park.

I remember reading issues of *Boy's Life* magazine, and thrilling at the advertisements that beckoned me to “Be a Conservationist.” By the time I reached high school, living on the Piedmont of North Carolina, I knew without a doubt what I wanted to be and where I wanted to live. I was going to be a forester, and I was going to live in the Rocky Mountain West.

Colorado seemed the likely place to start, so I enrolled in the College of Forestry and Natural Resources at Colorado State University. The rest, as they say, is history. The past 25 years have found me working on three national forests in Wyoming, Colorado and Alaska, and now on one of the true jewels of the national wildlife refuge system—the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. Whether fate, choice or a combination of both, I don't know, but I can truly say I feel blessed to have lived and worked in some of the most beautiful places on earth, alongside some of the finest people one could ever know.

One of the hobbies I have loosely adopted during my career as a forester and wildland firefighter, is the collection of Smokey Bear memorabilia. My favorite piece is a 20-year-old, 8 1/2-by-11 Smokey poster entitled, “Conservation Pledge.” The first time I laid eyes on that poster, I knew it perfectly described my boyhood pursuit and my passion as a public servant—to be a conservationist.

The Conservation Pledge states, “I give my pledge as an American to save and faithfully defend from waste the natural resources of my country—its soil and minerals, its forests, waters and wildlife.” I can imagine that many of you who read the *Refuge Notebook* column every Friday, have taken this pledge. Maybe you have not said those words, but you have lived them.

I met many such Americans at the Kenai refuge's 60th birthday celebration last Saturday, people who

care deeply about public lands and natural resources, people who also want their children and grandchildren to enjoy the great wide-open. I know I can speak for all the wonderful employees of the Kenai NWR in saying, “Thank You” to all who have worked and supported and enjoyed the refuge for the past 60 years.

Thanks to all of you who joined us on Saturday.

And we give a special thanks to all those who helped us make the 60th birthday celebration a success: the “Refuge Memories” of Cal Fair, Jim Fisher, Bob Ritchey and Will Troyer, the Friends of the Kenai NWR, the Alaska Natural History Association, the

Bird Treatment & Learning Center, Marathon Oil, Unocal Alaska, “Four on the Richter Scale,” all the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service employees who drove down from Anchorage to be with us—especially the four “judges” and Cathy Rezabeck, and the staffs and volunteers of the Kenai Fishery Resources Office and Kenai NWR.

Doug Newbould is the fire management officer at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. For more information about the Refuge, visit the headquarters on Ski Hill Road in Soldotna, call 262-7021 or see the website at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.