

AN INTERVIEW with JACK WARD THOMAS

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These are excerpts from the original interview.

Jack Ward Thomas retired last fall after a three-year stint as the 13th chief of the U.S. Forest Service, bringing to a close his 30-year career with what government scholars have called a "superstar" agency.

An internationally-respected wildlife biologist, Thomas specialized in elk, deer, and wild turkey biology before he tackled controversial work in wildlife habitats, spotted owl management, and old growth ecosystems. He led the Forest Service through the federal court system in its battles over owl habitat, and was tapped by President Clinton to lead the team that developed the Northwest Forest Plan. Clinton and Vice President Al Gore then persuaded him to take the helm of the Forest Service -- despite opposition from the timber industry, environmental groups, and old-guard agency people.

When he stepped down, Thomas moved from Washington, D.C. back to the mountains. He turned down offers from other universities in favor of Missoula's University of Montana. His new position as Boone and Crockett Professor of Wildlife Conservation is endowed by the Boone and Crockett Club, one of the nation's oldest conservation organizations.

One of the best things about not working for the government anymore has got to be the ability to speak at will -- not that anyone's ever been able to tell Jack Thomas what he could or could not say.

REMEMBERING SOUTH CANYON

Q: You and Mike Dombeck, who was BLM Director at the time, were at South Canyon. Tell me about that.

Well, we got there and got checked in to the hotel, and some of the survivors were out on the patio. It was not immediately obvious to them who we were. The chief of the forest service and director of the BLM were probably not real high on the list of people that they expected to run into. The firefighters who were there were pretty shaken up; they wanted to go home. They were going through debriefings, and they had a stress management team there, and the firefighters just wanted to go home. We told them to fly them home the next day. We promised we would fly the bodies of their buddies home and have a regional forester with them. I've gotten notes of appreciation from some of them about that."

Q: Didn't you have a little encounter with some of the media?

Well, yeah, Secretary Babbitt and Colorado Governor Roy Romer were there, and there was a feeding frenzy going on with the press. All the questions were predicated on who messed up and who was going to suffer for this. It was discouraging, if not disgusting. We had left the bodies there, briefly, for the investigation, and some newspaper people sneaked in and took pictures of those kids. I was never more angry and disgusted.

I talked to the Prineville crew chief, and I promised him that we were not looking for scapegoats. The goal was to learn from the experience and not have to repeat it.

Later, I was at the supervisor's office and I had met with the family of a helicopter crew member that we couldn't find. They wanted me to tell them that we'd find him, but I figured there was almost zero chance we'd find them alive. It was very emotional for everyone. As we were leaving, there was a press guy who called out, "Hey Chief, you got your coverup under way?" I went after him, and the security guy with me grabbed me and said, "You don't want to do that." "Yeah," I said, "I really do." Fortunately, he stopped me until my temper cooled. My sense of humor was exhausted.

Q: Do you think the increased emphasis on safety after South Canyon has compromised aggression on the fire line?

No. We learned a lot about Safety at South Canyon. Aggressive fire fighting isn't compromised so much as it is more carefully regulated now. We have to be aggressive in order to be effective. We went through that OSHA "zero tolerance of risk" business -- we can minimize risk, but we can't have zero. On a fire you've got trees blowing up and helicopters and rocks flying through the air -- it's hazardous. It's like a war.

When you have property values at stake, and lives at risk, you're probably a little more aggressive than you would be otherwise. But still, I gave the order and I meant it. Safety first, on every fire, every time. That doesn't mean an end to aggressive fire fighting; it means being aggressive in a rational and intelligent manner. We shouldn't be aggressive just for aggression's sake.

Q: What could we best do to improve fire fighting and fire management -- from your perspective now, after three years in Washington?

We probably could start by appreciating firefighters a bit more than we have. It's pretty hard to build a career in the fire business. The grades are not high enough, so you get diverted off into other things in order to make a decent living. If you're going to college and fighting fire in the summertime, that's one thing. But when you've got these really good firefighters that are coming back season after season, after a while you're kind of torn up about it because you know that you've got them in a dead-end operation. This is like playing professional baseball or something. You can't make it after so many years. And so you're torn between being ecstatic when you see that you're getting them back, and then knowing that you're participating in keeping them hanging on year after year when there's nothing you can do for them. You look at these heroes out there, and everybody's applauding at the end of the fire season -- and they go home and cough for another three months. They've got no hospitalization, they've got no retirement, we don't pay them enough -- and they just keep coming back for more.

You've got people in a tough job that doesn't pay very well, and there's not much room for advancement. Civil service has been devalued to the point that no matter what you do, you're wrong. The press beat on you, and you try to make your case for the way you did it -- you have to explain why you didn't fight a fire this way or that way, and what do you hear? "Well, didn't you make a mistake?" Yeah, it's real easy fighting one of those fires from a distance, sitting on your butt with a cold one in your hand. Enough of that and after a while you'd think firefighters would look up and say, "I don't need this."

I've been around long enough to witness many of the big strides made in forestry and wildlife management. And I've been lucky to have been a part of all that. When I started out in wildlife conservation, I was out in the field counting deer pellets. Now we look at the big picture with ecosystem management. And we look at the big picture with fire -- we used to figure fire was just bad, and it burned stuff up. Now we study the history of fire -- how often did it burn? How hot did it burn? What were the consequences of the burn? How do we think our way through this and make sure we do better than we did before?

It's pointless to complain about where we are. What's important is to ask, "How did we get here? And how do we now get to a better place?"

This article is from a series of interviews with Jack Ward Thomas in March 1997 in Missoula, Montana.

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