After a boyhood enjoying the woods and a dedicated 34-year career in the U.S. Forest Service (USFS), Robert D. “Bob” Tokarczyk could not have timed his day to support Northwest forestry, its proud history, and a better understanding of the role of forests in our society. While Bob always willingly met new challenges with good humor, his leadership was peerless. He was the consummate Supervisor of the Gifford Pinchot National Forest in the months before and after the historic May 18, 1980, eruption of Mount St. Helens.

Bob was born in Tacoma, Washington, on August 15, 1926, the middle child of William Walter and Lily Brown Tokarczyk. Bob had an older brother Walt and younger sister Dorothy. As a child, Bob spoke some Polish with his family, though his father wanted all the Tokarczyk children to master English to succeed in America.

Though Bob grew up in the heart of the Great Depression, he recalls a happy childhood and close-knit family. “We were a loving, supportive family, and all got along well.” His father worked as a logger—felling timber and running machinery—and was part owner of a small mill that cut ties for railroads.

Bob graduated from Tacoma’s Lincoln High School in 1944. He was already interested in forestry—and was able to take forestry classes in high school.

With his sights set on a career in forestry, Bob enrolled in Washington State College (now Washington State University) in Pullman, Washington. He majored in Forest Management and minored in Wildlife, receiving his B.S. in 1951. While his education necessarily included long hours in the classroom, he added hands-on experience in the woods. In summers, he worked various student forestry jobs, such as grading roads near Spirit Lake at the foot of Mount St. Helens.

1951 was a particularly busy year for Bob. He not only completed college and took his first permanent, full-time job with the USFS, he also met his college sweetheart, Barbara Heald. They had two children, Marsha (b. 1952) and Bruce (b. 1956). In 1951, with the Korean War under way, Bob was also drafted to serve in the U.S. Marine Corps. Since his childhood, however, Bob had suffered from eye problems and had twice had surgery. As a result of Bob’s partial blindness, the Marines discharged him, which allowed him to report for his job as a Junior Forestier.

A personable and dedicated employee, Bob rose rapidly through numerous positions in the USFS. The first of his many career moves was to southwest Washington. After assignments in Pocatello, Idaho, and Vancouver, Bob became the District Ranger for the Mount Adams Ranger District in Trout Lake. It was an exciting time, though it required Bob to move his young family every few years.

In 1961, the USFS assigned Bob to the Siskiyou National Forest in southern Oregon (now part of the Rogue River-Siskiyou National Forest) to assist with timber salvage following the historic Columbus Day Storm of October 12, 1962. In the storm’s aftermath, Bob and his colleagues were able to salvage and sell about 400 million board feet from the Siskiyou.

Bob’s strong work ethic and friendly management style opened up new opportunities for him in the USFS. After serving five years in the Siskiyou National Forest, he became head of the timber staff for the Willamette National Forest. Working from the USFS office in Eugene, Bob negotiated timber sales and harvesting—balancing social, economic, and environmental interests. And it was quite a balancing act.

“I introduced the ‘Sales and Trails’ breakfasts to bring people together to resolve differences,” Bob recalled. Under his supervision, environmental advocates, scientists, and timber industry representatives sat down to discuss harvesting plans that protected trails and trailheads. “In one year, there were 149 appeals contesting timber sales, and we settled 148.” Bob said proudly of his peace-making. In 1974, the timber staff of the Willamette National Forest sold one billion board feet of timber and supervised the harvesting of one billion board feet. This is the highest level of production ever matched in a U.S. National Forest.

After a brief assignment as Deputy Forest Supervisor of the Deschutes National Forest in central Oregon, Bob became Forest Supervisor of the Gifford Pinchot National Forest in 1976. He held this position until his retirement from the USFS in June 1983. Through Bob’s leadership, the forest became a veritable model for the management of National Forests. Under Bob’s leadership, the forest increased its productivity through seed orchards and reforestation. Bob also acted as ambassador of the USFS to local and state officials, to the media, and to the greater community of southwest Washington.

During this period, Bob also served as the head of a regional fire team. Usually about four or five times each fire season, the team mobilized to fight forest fires in California, Oregon, and Washington. Bob helped prioritize equipment, assign smokejumpers, and coordinate with other teams.

Bob’s planning and management skills were especially put to the test when Mount St. Helens became active and then erupted. In March 1980, the dormant volcano—active since the mid-19th century—began to rumble with a series of small earthquakes. Though the peak of Mount St. Helens was privately owned at the time—by Burlington Northern Railroad—significant portions of the surrounding area fell within the Gifford Pinchot and were therefore Bob’s responsibility. In conjunction with an executive order issued by Washington Governor Dixie Lee Ray and working closely with local law agencies, Bob enforced an exclusive “red zone” around the perimeter of the volcano. The red zone became a place where nothing could go in or come out.

“Bob did an outstanding job coordinating communications and activities among numerous government services,” recalled Jim Rembach, who headed up operations for Weyerhaeuser in the Mount St. Helens area. Rembach said the effort during the Mount St. Helens crisis showed government working at its best. In recognition of his outstanding work leading up to the eruption, Bob received a Superior Service Award from the U.S. Department of Agriculture and a letter of commendation from Washington’s Members of Congress. On Sunday, May 18, at 8:32 a.m., Bob was at home when St. Helens transformed in a matter of seconds. An earthquake caused the north face of the mountain to slide away and this was followed by a massive eruption. The blast injured Bob, but he knew that the mountain had blown but he did not know its severity.

The scale of the eruption is difficult to imagine. The most cataclysmic volcanic event in the history of the United States, the mountain had blown but he did not know its severity. Almost simultaneously, Bob held the job of Executive Director of the Western Forestry and Conservation Association. In more recent years, Bob has volunteered his forestry expertise to several organizations. For the past decade, he has helped manage forestlands owned by the local Boy Scouts of America. Bob also helps select Outstanding Tree Farms as a judge for the Oregon Small Woodland Association.

Bob remains involved with institutions close to his heart. For decades, he has been active in the “Alumni” of Washington State University, and served as president of the organization. In 1981, Bob received the Outstanding Alumni Award from WSU’s Department of Forestry and Range Management.

Bob could have continued to climb the career ladder with the Forest Service, but any advance would have required leaving the Northwest. Instead, Bob chose to wrap up his USFS career and stay in the area. Lauding his “conservation ethic,” the Vancouver Columbian noted Bob’s deserved “pride that his [Gifford Pinchot] forest is gone; lesser, more productive and more enjoyable than adjacent private and state lands.”

This sentiment was echoed by Bob Williams, who succeeded Bob Tokarczyk as Forest Supervisor of the Gifford Pinchot. “He left the forest in superb condition, and I inherited a well-run organization.”

When Bob Tokarczyk retired from the Forest Service, he had no intention of slowing down—though he welcomed the chance to fish and hunt more often. A member of the Society of American Foresters since 1959, Bob agreed to serve as Executive Director of the Oregon Society of American Foresters (OSAF). He held this position from 1984 to 1991, working out of an office at the World Forestry Center. Almost simultaneously, Bob held the job of Executive Director of the Western Forestry and Conservation Association.

While Bob remained active in forestry, he also enjoys spending time with his extended family, including children, stepchildren, grandchildren, and great grandchildren. After Bob’s wife Barbara passed away, he married her sister Beverly, who had two grown children of her own, Lynda (b. 1948) and Sandy (b. 1950). Sadly, Beverly passed away in 2011.

Bob’s awards and recognitions may not adequately capture two of his greatest strengths: good humor and peace-making. Bob worked well with people throughout his career, finding a way forward during times of crisis or dispute. A lifelong collector of Polish jokes andagrams—as a result of his ancestry and challenging last name—Bob says cooperation is always easier to achieve if you can “smack in a little humor.”

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