



Robert D. Tokarczyk

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After a boyhood enjoying the woods and a dedicated 34-year career in the U.S. Forest Service (USFS), Robert D. "Bob" Tokarczyk continues to this 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 particularly commendable as 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 married 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 Forester.

A personable and dedicated employee, Bob rose rapidly through numerous positions in the USFS. The first years of his career were spent in southwest Washington. After assignments in Packwood, Randle, 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 1963, 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 direction, environmental advocates, scientists, and timber industry representatives worked together to develop harvesting plans that protected trails and sightlines. "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 reached 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. Though Bob worked from the forest's headquarters in downtown Vancouver, Washington, he also spent days at a time in the vast 1.3 million-acre Gifford Pinchot.

As head of a National Forest, Bob had numerous responsibilities. He oversaw a staff of 900 permanent employees, which increased to about 1,400 in the summer. 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—inactive 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 exclusionary "red zone" around the perimeter of the volcano.

"Bob did an outstanding job coordinating communications and activities among numerous government services," recalled Jim Rombach, who headed up operations for Weyerhaeuser in the Mount St. Helens area. Rombach 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 momentarily 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 jolted Bob; 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 eruption destroyed homes, bridges, and roads, and killed 57 people. The mountain itself lost 1,314 feet of elevation, and more than 4 billion board feet of timber were damaged or destroyed.

As destructive as the eruption was, the damage and loss of life could have been much worse. Luck played an important part, but Bob's caution helped save lives, too. Because Bob evacuated USFS facilities and lands in the red zone, no Forest Service personnel were hurt or killed in the blast.

Bob had been busy in the days leading up to the eruption, but the days that followed he worked around the clock. The main effort—removing ash, repairing roads and facilities, salvaging wood—took many months and required thousands of people. But in the immediate aftermath, Bob had one core duty: to review damage and coordinate action with U.S. President Jimmy Carter, Northwest governors, and the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

Accompanied by Whitehouse staff and Secret Service agents, President Carter arrived at Bob's office to receive an in-person

briefing. Bob, President Carter, and the governors of Idaho and Washington sat knee-to-knee on the President's helicopter and surveyed the vast damage.

A great deal of political and policy debate followed in the wake of the Mount St. Helens eruption. How would the area be preserved, rebuilt, and used by future generations? While some wanted Mount St. Helens turned over to the National Park Service, Bob advocated for the area to remain under the stewardship of the USFS. Though the debate was fierce at times, eventually Congress established the Mount St. Helens National Volcanic Monument, under the management of the Forest Service.

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 greener, lusher, 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 super 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.

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 "Ag Alumni" of Washington State University, and served as president of the organization. In 1981, Bob received the Outstanding Alumnus Award from WSU's Department of Forestry and Range Management.

Though Bob retired from the Forest Service, he never really left. In addition to spending time hunting and fishing in National Forest lands, he has been an active member and twice president of the Pacific Northwest Forest Service Association, fondly known as the "OldSmokeys." Bob also served for 15 years on the board of the National Museum of Forest Service History.

Bob has been deservedly recognized by the northwest and national forestry communities for his lifetime of service. OSAF honored him with a Lifetime Achievement Award in 1994. In 2000, the national SAF recognized Bob's longtime effort to promote forestry with its prestigious John A. Beale Memorial Award.

While Bob remains 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, Bev passed away in 2011.

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