

2008: The Year In Review



More in the **KIDS** **WOODS**



A Letter From The Forest Supervisor



What a year! From the ice storms of winter to the floodwaters of summer and all the events and partnerships we have worked on in between, it has been an eventful year.

Since being named Chief of the Forest Service, Gail Kimbell has visited many national forests across the country. A result of these travels has been recognition of three major themes in the Forest Service – climate change, water and kids. The challenges associated with climate change and water will not be

resolved in a few years, but rather over generations. Kids are another story. The importance of providing experiences and education opportunities now is critical as the nation faces future discussions on the use and values of the nation's resources. It is my hope that the interaction of kids and the woods will be of significance in their lives as they make their own decisions on the value and uses of the natural resources with which this nation is so richly endowed.

Through our More Kids in the Woods initiative, the Shawnee National Forest provides many opportunities for kids to experience the Forest through conservation education programs. Many of these programs are partnerships with other agencies and organizations, who also recognize the importance of kids in the woods. Several of these programs have won awards, some at the national level, for their outstanding benefits to children. These programs include Fish Tales; Stewardship Week; the Montreal Voyager; fishing derbies; National Trails Day; Let's Go Batty; I, too, Am America and numerous visits to schools and other gatherings.

In closing, to those partners who have invested time, energy and funding to this year's successes, thank you. Our programs are much richer due to your contributions. For those of you who would like to become involved, please give us a call as we have opportunities for all.

Forest Supervisor
Allen Nicholas

Awards

Regional Forester Honor Awards

■ Michael Sublett, Department of Geography from Illinois State University, and Forestry Technician Kelly Pearson, received The Excellence in Wilderness Management Research Award for their inventory of non-native invasive species in the 774 acre Panther Den Wilderness.

■ **Best of the Best** - Natural Resource Stewardship Award was presented to Beth Shimp, Shawnee National Forest Botanist, for her dedication to increasing the federally threatened Mead's milkweed populations on the Forest.



National Chief's Honor Awards

■ The Hidden Springs Ranger District Trail Crew received the Chief's award for Walking the Talk of Sustainability - Traditional Skills and Minimum Tools Leadership for their work on the Lusk Creek Wilderness, heavily used, designated trail system.

Safety

■ Safety first is the number one concern in all work or recreational aspects of the Forest. This year natural events caused great concern for the safety of employees, volunteers and visitors. High winds and ice storms resulted in closure of many Forest roads due to downed trees. Forest employees were out clearing roads within hours of the events. More than 1,000 hours working with equipment and chainsaws were spent safely re-opening roads.

■ A total of 182,521 hours were worked and 594,546 miles were driven from July 1, 2007 until June 30, 2008 without any chargeable accidents.

■ Storm events in February and March 2008 caused considerable damage to Forest roads. Trees fell across roads, culverts washed out, hill-sides slumped into roadways, severe rutting occurred and road surfaces washed down the hillsides leaving large holes. The severity of the damage allowed the Forest to qualify for Emergency Relief for Federally Owned Roads (ERFO) funding from the Federal Highway Administration. To date the Forest is scheduled

to receive over \$1.5 million to permanently repair damage that occurred. These repairs will be made over the next two years and cover almost 50 miles. One project the ERFO funding benefits is our support to the U. S. Army Corps of Engineers for the repair and maintenance of the Big Muddy Levee Road system that protects the community of Grand Tower located along the Big Muddy River. Another planned ERFO project is repair of the access road to the Johnson Creek Campground.

■ We bladed and graveled two old two-track forest roads to open as emergency exits for residents trapped due to flooding in the area.

■ We supported wildland fire fighting efforts, wildland fire operations, hurricane damage clean-up and provided law enforcement personnel for 67 incidents in 19 states, with 45 full-time and seasonal employees for a total of 1,374 days in the 2008 fiscal year.



Revolutionizing Effectiveness and Efficiency

■ As part of the Forest's Adopt-A-Trail, the Southern Illinois University at Carbondale Geography Club volunteers adopted three and one half miles of wilderness trail to maintain. The Saluki Volunteer Corps had three workdays, plus some time for miscellaneous tasks to aid in meeting Forest visitor's recreation needs.

■ Trash Bash, the Sierra Club's annual organized volunteer trash pick-up day, netted 55 bags of trash, 30 sorted for recycling. Trash collected by 44 individuals totaling 176 volunteer hours.

■ The 19 local Sierra Club volunteers spent 578 hours in the field using the Global Positioning System for locating over 278 NNIS sites.

■ Donated Volunteer Hours for 2008 totaled approximately 8,373 (over double the 2007 number) for an estimated contribution of over \$154,000.



Protecting Ecosystems Across Boundaries

Without our numerous partnerships with other federal, state and local agencies; non-profit groups and organizations; and volunteers we could not meet our goals, objectives and needs.

■ Steve Widowski was selected for the position of Middle Mississippi River Partnership Coordinator in 2008 to streamline the efforts of the twenty partners representing federal, state, local agencies and private organizations and individual partners working together to restore and reforest projects in the Mississippi River and the Big Muddy River bottomlands. After the floods of 1993 and 1995 we began the acquisition of approximately 3,000 acres of marginal farmlands in the floodplain of the Middle Mississippi River. In 2008 we completed 150 acres of reforestation in this area in partnership with the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS). We also entered into an agreement with Ducks Unlimited for wetland restoration in the Big Muddy Wetland and five wetlands were restored affecting approximately 35 acres.

■ The Middle Mississippi River Corridor is improved by the acquisition of 26 acres of floodplain from the American Land Conservancy that includes a boat ramp and 1/2 mile of river frontage. This acquisition provides access to the Big Muddy River, enhances potential habitat for the State of Illinois' endangered little blue heron, and protects the habitat for the American Bald Eagle within this area.



■ We have an option with The Nature Conservancy (TNC) for 68 acres that adjoins Clear Springs Wilderness that will enhance the non-motorized access into the wilderness, and provide protection of a limestone cave and spring that contains a spring cavefish popula-

tion. We are processing another case with TNC for 153 acres that will link Bald Knob Wilderness with Camp Hutchins Study Area and provide habitat for neo-tropical migrant birds and provide opportunities for restoration of fish habitat.

■ With assistance from the Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR), we acquired two



surplus federal wildland fire trucks. The trucks were donated to the Pope County Fire Protection District and the Cypress Fire Department. The partnership between forest fire personnel and IDNR was instrumental in acquiring these trucks for local communities in the face of nation-wide competition.

■ Cooperative Fire Agreements between the Shawnee National Forest and eleven local fire departments and districts were completed. These agreements to work across boundaries provide fire aid and coordination between the parties more efficiently and effectively to detect, prevent and suppress wildland fires within the jurisdictions of the participating agencies.

■ The Invasive-Free Zone (IFZ) Challenge establishes administrative sites; Cave Hill Natural Area and Ecological Area, and LaRue-Pine Hills Research Natural Area, totaling approximately 3,794 acres, as IFZ's. The goal is to create a network of invasive free sites and provide core areas from which expanded IFZ's can be created

through partnerships with local landowners, communities, schools, counties, states and federal agencies partnerships.

■ Prescribed fire was used to manage non-native invasive plant species (NNIS) on 534 acres this year. Mechanical methods were used for removal of non-native species on 621 acres, and the Sierra Club hand-pulled NNIS in 32 locations. Prescribed fire, mechanical and hand removal of non-native species and the IFZ Challenge signed in 2008 all address the objectives of the River to River Cooperative Weed Management Area consortium formed in 2006.

■ In 2008 The Shawnee Trails Conservancy (STC) was able to secure a grant of \$20,000 from the Illinois Equine Research and Promotion Board. In partnership with the national forest, STC used the grant to match funds for a larger grant application submitted to the State of Illinois' Recreational Trails Program. Preliminary results of this application indicates that in the spring of 2009, the STC and the Forest partnership may receive a significant grant from the Recreational Trails Program for trail work on the national forest. The Forest greatly appreciates the initiative shown by the STC for their continued support of trail work.

■ Improvements in our trail system to provide quality recreation experiences include the construction or reconstruction of 13.25



miles of trail and maintenance of 115.65 miles of trail. The construction/reconstruction work included two switchbacks and one climbing turn. The maintenance work included brushing, removal of downed trees, water bars and check dams. Work we completed on trails in the wilderness and natural areas was accomplished with the assistance of pack animal teams from the Hoosier and Bridger-Teton National Forests.

■ We developed a Programmatic Agreement with Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie to streamline compliance with the



National Historic Preservation Act for prescribed burning. Designed to set controlled fires on Forest Service lands, the goal is to decrease the adverse affect on historic properties by reducing hazardous fuels and promoting growth of desirable vegetation. This streamlined approach will enable us to reduce costs and time associated with consultation and identification efforts on federal lands.



More Kids in the Woods

■ The Shawnee National Forest participated in the 19th annual University of Illinois Resource Center Stewardship Week, an environmental education program. This four-day program has over 35 activity stations set up on the Center's grounds for children, kindergarten through 6th grade, to attend. The 3,188 students attending this year bring the 19-year total to over 55,000 students who have experienced this hands-on, environmental education adventure.



■ Where better can you learn the history of the Shawnee Hills than by paddling a 34' Montreal voyageur canoe? About 60 kids from across the southern part of the state learned about the French heritage of southern Illinois, how to identify local trees and fish and to make a little music, all in one day by participating in the Shawnee National Forest's More Kids in the Woods conservation education program. We were joined by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers at Rend Lake, the Crab Orchard National Wildlife Refuge and the Illinois Department of Natural Resources to make the day a success.

■ Additional environmental and cultural resource education programs that support the more kids in the woods goals are: fishing derbies; I, too, Am America; National Trails Day; and Fish Tales.



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Connecting Citizens to the Land

■ We conducted 295 survey-days this year at randomly chosen recreation sites, trailheads and along Forest roads. This is the second time the Forest has conducted National Visitor Use Monitoring Program surveys, a nationwide scientific method used by the Forest Service to estimate the numbers of recreation users using our National Forests, provides valuable information about the people we serve.

■ Garden of the Gods Recreation Area, one of the most visited sites on the Forest, has just gotten better. Improvements have been completed on trail access to the rock formations; pull offs and updated water systems also help provide a more accessible, enjoyable recreation experience for a diverse public.

■ Signing, improvements and non-native plant species removal in wilderness such as Lusk Creek and Panther's Den.

■ The Lincoln/Douglas debate reenactment in September, 2008, brought Abraham Lincoln and Stephan Douglas together once again "in a grove of trees north of town" in Jonesboro, Illinois, 150 years after their original historic meeting. The citizens of Anna and Jonesboro

formed a committee, made improvements to the site and commissioned local artist Tom Allen to create the new Lincoln and Douglas



statues for the Lincoln Memorial Picnic Grounds on the administrative site of the Mississippi Bluffs Ranger District and organized the re-enactment day activities.

■ Main Street Elizabethtown located in the Old Heritage Shop on First Street (Highway 146) in Hardin County, Illinois is now providing information and brochures regarding the Forest. Their hours are 10:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m. Monday through Saturday. They can be reached by phone at (618) 287-4333.

Walking the Talk for Sustainability

■ The Shawnee National Forest formed a Green Team. The Team has renewed recycling efforts, worked with the Forest's Employee Association to purchase 250 recyclable cloth shopping bags to sell to employees, family and friends and best of all - found mass-transit opportunities for employees and members of the public. Posting travel needs and coordinating carpooling efforts when possible is encouraged.

■ We have reduced our Forest fleet from 38 passenger carrying vehicles in 2007 to 31 in 2008 to reduce maintenance expenses.



Be an Employer of Choice

■ We have several programs that provide students the opportunity for on-the-job training, exposing them to the Forest Service and providing future career opportunities in fields such as: wildlife, fisheries, trails maintenance and construction, recreation, botany, ecology and timber.

■ Twenty Student Training Employment Program (STEP) students and four Student Career

Employment Program students (SCEP), college students seeking on the job experience, worked at tasks that will be beneficial when seeking future employment. An example is the accomplishments of SCEP Melissa Mead and STEP Kaci Price, who worked with a local soil and water conservation district to stabilize a section of eroding stream bank on Big Grand Pierre Creek. Stabilization of the stream bank prevents further erosion of sediments into



the stream from the adjacent fields to conserve habitats for stream flora and fauna found in this watershed.

■ Mississippi Bluffs Ranger District hosted ten AmeriCorps National Civilian Conservation Corps students, ages 18 to 24, from the full-time, team-based residential program located on their campus in Denver, Colorado. Team members spent six weeks working on construction of trail tread and switchbacks in conjunction with a major trail realignment project on the River to River Trail in Bald Knob and Clear Springs Wildernesses. This trails project provided an opportunity for the crew to participate in a wilderness experience, learn self-reliance and discover first hand the existing job opportunities.

■ The Youth Conservation Corps, a summer work opportunity program for high school students, employed seven students who worked to gain field experience in recreation and trail maintenance.



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