



# Western Forester

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## Working to Create a More Equitable Workplace in Forestry

By Sue Rodman

At age 20, I began my forestry career at a Christmas tree farm in Osseo, Minnesota, while attending the University of Minnesota in 1993. The next year, I was a technician for the St. Louis County Department of Lands based in Cloquet. Working for foresters who included Carl Vogt and John Thomas inspired me to learn more about forestry while humbling me to recognize how much knowledge about trees and the timber industry there was to apply to our Minnesota forests. The forest technician at the county was one of the few women I worked with in the field besides my fellow students; Virginia had a lot of years in the field and was the go-to person for the foresters. She was my first female role



model in the industry, and I hoped to have her field savviness someday.

This trajectory of learning and being humbled continued in 1995 during my internship at Weyerhaeuser's Snoqualmie Tree Farm in Washington State. Here, women worked in all sectors of the Weyerhaeuser family, and all foresters were dedicated to the science, the company, the production of quality timber products, and the team to make it happen. Among the many talented male and female Weyerhaeuser foresters I had the honor of working in the field with Norman Vogt and Jeanne Hunt. These industry giants exemplified a strong commitment to forestry and the lands that grew these beautiful trees. There was ample opportunity for advancement if I was willing to work and think in this supportive and productive environment. Everyone there from administrative staff to logging engineers busted ass in the woods every day; at the same time, they encouraged me as an intern and demonstrated respectful treatment of all colleagues.

After migrating north to Alaska, I accepted a job as the first forester at the Anchorage Fire Department under Chief John Fullenwider. We were managing the hazard of wildland urban interface fire in the wake of a spruce beetle epidemic while addressing the reality of living in the fire-adapted boreal forest. Fire and forestry are deeply connected in Alaska in a way I had not witnessed in the Northwest,



PHOTO COURTESY OF SUE RODMAN

**Sue Rodman's 28-year career began in Minnesota at a Christmas tree farm and includes stints at the St. Louise County Department of Lands, Weyerhaeuser, and the Anchorage Fire Department. Currently, she is program coordinator for the Alaska Department of Fish and Game.**

but it is apparent these two industries were converging quickly with our climatic shifts and accumulating fuels.

Soon after my hire, our team of two female foresters and one education specialist created a community Firewise program with substantial funding and political support inside of an organization with relatively few other female professionals. At one internal city assembly, we were referred to as 'lovely ladies' doing the job of mitigating wildfire. Some criticized this phrase in our defense, but the Chief maintained his position as an 'honest statement.'

Our crew of lovely ladies administered contracts with the state's Pioneer Peak Hotshots (formerly the Mat Su Crew) and the Tazlina Hotshots. This is somewhat ironic because maybe a

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## Western Forester

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## Working to Create a More Equitable Workplace in Forestry

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handful of women ever served on the state crew and few ever even applied to Tazlina, save the valiant efforts of Jeannine Walker who was so close to transcending that barrier on Tazlina decades ago. But the women who did work on the Mat Su Crew demonstrated strength and durability in their fortitude for hard work.

Now, in my position as program coordinator for the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, I am responsible for enhancing habitat for wildlife through mechanical treatments, prescribed fire, and wildland fire use. While a majority of the biologist and leadership positions are staffed by men, women fill positions through the ranks to deputy director. In a recent administration, our commissioner was female. Other departments in the state compare similarly with women filling all ranks of the line and leadership. Women do experience various forms of discrimination in the workplace in the context of work schedules and childcare; these situations have resulted in hurtful and unspoken gestures. I commend the women who navigate their path through these challenging coworkers and misunderstandings. These capable women are deconstructing the gender bias one situation at a time, although not with 100 percent success. At least we see how society is refining its definitions of equality and workforce development to acknowledge women's achievements and recognize their parental roles too.

### Behavior—then and now

In 1997, my partner and I won the 'World Championship' Jack and Jill crosscut saw event in Kooskia, Idaho.

We had competed professionally in the American Lumberjack Association (ALA) all summer, ready to take on the Australians. Touring every weekend from Priest River, Idaho, we packed up the truck and the dog to make the often midnight run to the coast or British Columbia for a show the next morning. We camped, cooked our own food, and raced back home on Sunday nights. The comradery was inspiring as our fellow competitors were a big group of friends who cheered each other on, helped one another with gear and technique, and didn't lose sight of the fun factor.

This pattern kept us going for several years, and I often enjoyed taking home prize money for winning events. The pay, however, was a fraction of what the men were awarded. When asking the ALA about this discrepancy, the answer was that men bring in the crowds and the money—women are essentially a side-show.

This unpleasant experience aside, over the years, I have witnessed notable changes in the workplace in how policies and attitudes changed around the treatment of women and men in the office. Employee training advanced to include presentations on workplace discrimination and the forms of sexual harassment. Staff often now have safe mechanisms to report unfair practices. Scoffing at these trainings was often the topic of closed-door office chatter with male colleagues as I sometimes had to agree that the sensitivity was pronounced. But admittedly, I became increasingly aware of my female colleagues' experiences and now have an objective view of the effects of discrimination on productivity and confidence.

These trainings unfortunately cannot still fully overcome personal or institutional biases. I have seen smart and capable women, who are viewed

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as intimidating or 'difficult' by men receive dismissive treatment. This tragedy creates roadblocks for women who are team players serving the mission of the agency, thereby wasting time and human capital.

Though it's easy to identify and recognize the bias behind the overt examples of discrimination on the basis of gender, it's the nuanced biases in the workplace that are more difficult to capture in words. Additionally, it's mentally and personally exhausting to wonder if I am misreading the situation. For example, at one meeting, I was not recognized as a member of a statewide coordinating group in front of several hundred attendees. Was it my gender or my agency affiliation that reduced my status in the speaker's dismissal of my statements? Or was it an accidental oversight? Being recognized for one's accomplishments is important for promotions and leadership opportunities, and there is a track record for women's accomplishments being deliberately overlooked. While some female colleagues have suffered substantially, I'm lucky to have few experiences like these that can cloud what are otherwise positive memories throughout my career.

### Looking ahead

As younger generations have entered the workforce, I have noticed an increase in respectful language and actions across ranks and gender, as well as use of objectivity in speech and tone over the years. I have considered that these attributes of a professional work environment are more noticeable now too that we have stronger workplace platforms for equality. And it may be that previous generation who had 'grown up' with more traditional experiences of gender-based roles in the household and workplace thought this bias was part of our society, not regarding it as discriminatory. I believe that us mid- and late-career

professionals advanced our professionalism through these practices and positive examples; it's likely that we accepted more and dealt with more nuanced and overt communications among our colleagues based on the generation in which we were raised. These generalities are not the rule, just my perspective.

This younger generation is also demanding greater attention to salary, opportunity, and work-life balance. Since I came from the school of paying your dues by working 50-hour weeks for \$10/hour to run around the mountains with a compass and clinometer, my patience for delivering higher pay to younger colleagues was limited. However, it became clear to me that excelling at assigned tasks and keeping a positive attitude in the workplace deserved merit increases when annual evaluations were due. The cost of living really does increase over time, and pay commensurate of work completed must be delivered. This applies to all employees regardless of age or sex.

Aside from my time with ALA, and apart from the few instances during my career where I felt a sincere sense of inequality with my peers, I have been lucky to work in organizations where respect and dignity were delivered equally among my colleagues. In writing this article, I spoke with other women about their experiences and heard quite a range of perspectives. It is my hope that as the younger generations continue to enter the workplace and societal norms change to allow for a more equitable workplace that my experiences and those of my colleagues will only be heard in reminiscences of "when I was in forestry." Yes, it will take time, but we forestry professionals are accustomed to adapting and responding to changing conditions. *WF*

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and Game. An SAF member and Fellow with the Cook Inlet chapter, she is the scholarship committee chair for AKSAF. Rodman can be reached at [srodman6@gmail.com](mailto:srodman6@gmail.com).

## Editor's Note

By Andrea Watts

Assuming the duties of editor of the *Western Forester* included inheriting the mid-1950's era production files of the *Western Forester*. In spite of the six decades between my files and these files, the production files remain very much the same: edited articles, photos, and editor correspondence, although mine are now mostly electronic. But the most notable difference is the published issues of the *Western Forester*. The few women featured were wives of the SAF male members; in contrast, last year every issue's lead article was written or cowritten by a woman.

In this "Women in Forestry" issue, what's noticeable is the juxtaposition of the past and present. Sue Rodman reflects upon her nearly 30-plus years in forestry, while Tia Beavert shares how she, as a young professional, navigates the workplace and encourages her younger employees. The experiences of Mindy Crandall and Jessica Leahy, while studying forestry in undergrad, inspired them to develop SWIFT. And WOWNet builds upon existing extension programming to offer a learning environment that better meets the needs of participants.

As always, thank you to all the people who were interviewed or contributed articles to this issue. The *Western Forester* would not be possible without these volunteer efforts. And many thanks to the loyal advertisers who continue to support this publication and the AKSAF, OSAF, and WSSAF members whose dues also fund the production of the *Western Forester*. *WF*

## Correction

In the spring 2021 issue, the map on page 3 did not display all the federally recognized tribes in Oregon and Washington State due to zoom extant that was selected. To view the map in its entirety, visit <https://biamaps.doi.gov/indianlands/>.

This publication is a benefit of your membership in your SAF State Society