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- [CHURCHES](#) (1)
- [EMPLOYMENT](#) (107)
- [EVENTS / THINGS TO D...](#) (35)
- [HOMES, REAL ESTATE, ...](#) (161)
- [HOSPITALITY SERVICE...](#) (0)
- [LOST & FOUND](#) (2)
- [NOTICES](#) (20)
- [PERSONAL ADS](#) (27)
- [POLITICAL ADVERTISIN...](#) (2)
- [PRODUCTS/MERCHANDISE](#) (142)
- [RECREATION](#) (2)
- [SALES: RUMMAGE/BAZAA...](#) (1)
- [TRANSPORTATION](#) (149)

Stine introduces new natural resources dean

Stafford hopes to make positive impact at Cloquet Forestry Center
WENDY JOHNSON
The Pine Journal

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Last Thursday, Cloquet Forestry Center Superintendent Bob Stine hosted a very important visitor. The University of Minnesota's new dean of the College of Natural Resources, Susan Stafford, was in town for a natural resource conference at UMD. On their way, they stopped by the office of the Pine Journal to introduce Stafford – one of only a handful of women serving as natural resource deans in the entire country – and talk about the future of natural resource education and management.

Stafford grew up in Syracuse, where her dad is now a retired professor in engineering.

She did her undergraduate work at Syracuse University and majored in biology. She then went on to the State University of New York, studying environmental science and forestry and earned a master's in quantitative ecology.

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She studied in the field of applied statistics for her PhD.

In her master's program, she worked on a mathematical model for fishing stocks on the Great Lakes, and then for her PhD., looked at a land valuation model for vacant and forested land in three counties in upstate New York.

Stafford then had the opportunity to go to Oregon State as a tenure track professor, working as a consulting statistician. It was there that she met in 1979, when he was in graduate school there, as well as Louise Yount, Mike Reichenbach and a number of other people who have connections to Cloquet and the U of M College of Natural Resources.

In 1994, she was invited to be a visiting division director at the National Science Foundation, commuting between Washington, D.C. and Oregon.

“After that experience, I thought I was ready to expand a bit,” she said, “and took advantage of an opportunity at Colorado State to be the department head in Forest Sciences.”

She was there for four years before receiving a letter about this time last year saying she was among those invited to apply for the deanship at the College of Natural Resources at the University of Minnesota.

“I gave it a little thought and decided it could be a wonderful opportunity,” she said.

She was offered the job and started on Oct. 1, 2002.

“My feet haven't hit the ground since!” she smiled. “I'm pleased at how welcoming people are. I get to work with wonderful people like Bob Stine (at the Cloquet Forestry Center) and a tremendous leadership group in the Twin Cities. It's

been wonderful.”

Stafford is matter-of-fact about the fact that she’s one of very few women in the entire United States to hold the typically male-dominated position of natural resource dean.

“It doesn’t just happen when you become a dean,” she said. “My interest has always been in science and math, so I was very often the only girl in the classroom, but you can’t let that bother you. You’re there to learn, the same as everybody else. I do think, however, it gives you a sense of making sure there’s a level playing field.”

Stafford is the first to admit that hers is not an easy job right now, with government cuts and intensifying debates over natural resource protection and utilization.

“Our natural resource managers are really challenged right now,” she said. “We need to bring people to the debate, both now and into the future, who can really understand and be a part of the give-and-take discussion about the folks who want to utilize our natural resources and those who want to protect them..... I think the role of the university is to convene the groups and to provide this impartial, level playing field for the discussion of these kinds of issues.”

She explained that one of the reasons she was in northeastern Minnesota on Thursday was to take part in an annual review of forestry and wildlife research sponsored by several different people, with the college taking the lead.

“We’re bringing together the DNR, the NRRRI and the Forest Service, along with agency people, industry people, private consultants and conservation group leaders. That’s the kind of forum we need to have – not just once a year but on an on-going basis.”

“It’s almost all researchers who are doing presentations on wildlife, forestry, fisheries, water policies,” added Stine. “It’s really meant for practitioners so they can get a feel for research that’s going on and a glimpse of what’s coming down the road for them in terms of the tools they can use and the things that researchers are thinking and talking about doing. It also helps solidify that connection between practitioners and researchers. Quite often, people at the university are viewed as being in an ‘ivory tower,’ with no clue what’s going on in the woods, and I don’t think that’s really true. We have a lot of people who spend a lot of time out understanding what’s going on.”

Stafford said the university’s college of natural resources is particularly attuned to that point.

“In a land grant institution such as ours,” she said, “you have this sort of trickle machine – you have research, you have education and you have outreach. Our college is very heavily invested in all of them, and we do not give short shift to the outreach. Look at the Cloquet Forestry Center, look at our Extension Service, look at the connections we have with the research outreach. We are also doubly enabled, because we are part of a comprehensive research community. We’re able to take the standings and the findings of a research university, push them out to the field with the practitioner and feed that back into the process to find out if we are providing the kind of tools that we need.”

The University of Minnesota College of Natural Resources currently has about 600 undergraduate students, and they offer five majors and three departments – the Department of Forestry, the Department of Wood and Paper Science and the Department of Fisheries, Wildlife and Conservation Biology.

Stafford said she would like to see the

college's enrollment grow by about 200, student, or 30 percent.


“We have to implement a managed growth plan for that, looking at our curricula and making sure we're teaching the kinds of things that the next generation of natural resource managers are going to need.”

Stafford said that some 30-50 percent of the state and federal natural resource managers are eligible to retire in the next three to five years.

“We need to be out there producing that human capital because society's going to need those kinds of people weighing in on the very complex natural resource issues that face society,” she said. “Where is there anything that doesn't in some way involve the environment in our daily lives?”

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