

# Practicing forestry in Florida

From cypress swamps to wildfire command centers to county fairs, this forester conducts business in a wide variety of settings.

**M**ichael Weston (B.S. Forest Science 2001) enjoys the many and diverse challenges of his position as senior forester in the Caloosahatchee District of the Florida Division of Forestry. “In the morning I can walk through a cypress swamp knee deep in water visiting with a private landowner, at noon I might talk to members of a homeowners’ association about safeguarding their houses from wildfires, and in the afternoon walk a golf course looking at stressed pine trees,” says Michael.

He provides public and private landowners with a “multiple-resource management plan” that includes technical assistance on insect and disease identification, silvicultural recommendations, prescribed fire plans, and wildfire mitigation. His clients can be found in both rural and urban settings in a three-county region in southwestern Florida.

Public relations is another major part of his work. “I communicate with the general public about the positives of forestry and good forestry practices. This involves writing newspaper articles, doing press interviews, designing press releases and holding workshops, as well as attending public events such as county fairs and parades,” explains Michael.

When wildfire strikes, Michael assumes another role as either public information officer to keep the media informed, or facilities manager for large fires to ensure

firefighters have adequate food, water, and shelter.

Because Michael is employed by a state government agency, he must also devote a portion of his time to writing reports and completing other administrative duties. Although he confesses that this is not his favorite task, he understands the importance of documenting how public tax dollars are being spent.

Michael says his most relevant class at the UW-Madison was the forestry capstone course (Forestry

590) that required him to assimilate all of his previous classes and prepare a presentation on a real-life situation. He says it was a good dry run for what his current job requires of him. He suggests current students pause and ask themselves if they really know how to apply the concepts they are learning to real world situations. He also says good communication is the name of the game and students should hone their communication skills while still in school.

“Communicating with the general public is what forestry is all about. Any class that helps students

communicate their forestry skills and concepts will be invaluable on the job,” says Michael. He adds one final recommendation: Join the Peace Corps if you can. The Peace Corps allows you to use your basic forestry skills and knowledge working hands-on with people to nurture forests. Michael completed a Peace Corps experience in Tanzania.

*Wearing his “silvicultural hat,” Michael Weston takes an increment core from a pine tree.*

