

# Taking charge of Indiana forestlands

By Carol Kugler 812-331-4359 | [ckugler@heraldt.com](mailto:ckugler@heraldt.com)  
0/0/

The small can be mighty. Those are words Mike Chaveas lives by in his role as supervisor of the Hoosier National Forest.

Chaveas has been head of Indianas 204,000-acre national forest for a little more than one year and has a positive attitude about the direction and vision its staff is taking.

2132346The majority of the state is not forested,68403173 Chaveas said, explaining that only 4 percent of Indiana is public forest. That includes both federal Hoosier National Forest and state-owned properties.

This forest has been doing really well,46108 he said. The challenge, he believes, is working in a forest that has a fragmented land base instead of the acres of continuous forestland. Anyone who looks at a map of the Hoosier National Forest will immediately see there are areas of forest with blocks of land that are privately owned. It1695160s much more difficult to do most things, from prescribed burns to building trails, in a forest that is segmented.

You have to work with partners, Chaveas explained, adding that forest staff are continuing to broaden their outreach and work with external partners, including the Indiana Department of Natural Resources, The Nature Conservancy, Sycamore Land Trust, the National Wild Turkey Federation and the Back Country Horsemen. Chaveas has been talking with members of the Sierra Club and Indiana Forest Alliance.

It163s a much different scene in Indiana than it is out West, where there are big blocks of contiguous forest that were never anything but wilderness. Chaveas knows about that having worked as a district ranger at Mount Hood National Forest. While there, Chaveas was in charge of about 400,000 acres of the 1.2 million-acre forest.

When Chaveas saw a notice for a supervisor at Indianas only national forest, he applied. I wasn22421t looking to leave Oregon,1922 he said. 20201695160But we02ve been coming back (to the Bloomington area) for years to visit his wifes father and grandmother, who is now 103 years old.

Chaveas wife, Kristi, is from Bloomington. Both were students at Indiana University in Bloomington, where Chaveas graduated with a masters in public affairs and environmental science from IUs School of Environmental and Public Affairs. While at IU, Chaveas met his future wife, who was also a SPEA graduate student. 46108I fell in love with the place when I was here,2 Chaveas said.

After leaving Bloomington, Chaveas worked as a wildlife biologist in the Peace Corps in Morocco. He then moved to Washington, D.C., where he began his career with the U.S. Forest Service helping to coordinate agency efforts with the International Programs office. After that, he worked in the Coconino National Forest near Flagstaff, Arizona, where he was a deputy district ranger. His position as district ranger on Mount Hood came after that.

He and his family do find time for hiking and camping, not only on national land but across the state, including a fun trip to Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore.

## Thinking about forests

Hes also in charge of the national forest with the smallest number of acres in Region 9 of the U.S. Forest Service that contains 20 states from Maine to the upper Midwest. Because of the Hoosier National Forest162s unique patchwork outline, Chaveas believes forest officials have to think beyond the forest itself. 252774You cant just think about the forest goals,123444107 he said. You have to think about Indianas forests, both public and private.

And thinking about forests is more than just thinking about timber or trees. It includes thinking about habitat for wildlife, controlling invasive species of plants and animals, working to establish better soils and foundations for plants, restoring areas that have been damaged or are reverting to wooded acreage and finding ways to fund all of that.

Chaveas is concerned that there is a lack of awareness of Indiana residents of what there already is in terms of public lands, both national and state. He wants to improve outreach to Hoosiers, from along Lake Monroes shoreline to the Ohio River, so they realize the benefits they already receive from the Hoosier National Forest and other public land. Those forested areas help keep Indianas waters cleaner, keep sediment from washing into waterways, help clean the air above and provide recreational opportunities.

People are connected to the forest whether they realize it or not, Chaveas said. He hopes educating people as to what forested land does will help Hoosiers work harder to protect the land so there are fewer problems with water, air and soil. 378252774It has to be a bigger discussion if we want healthier forests in the area, he said.

Providing a diversity of forest types and wooded areas with different age trees will help, Chaveas believes. We know change is happening,41593 he said of the Earths climate. Having a more diverse forest will help it to better withstand shocks to the climate.

One of the unique management issues facing the Hoosier National Forest is the miles and miles of land 11901225 1,500 miles in total 3234610 that borders other property, both public and private. 11699That441071870s a lot of neighbors,466 Chaveas said, adding that encroachment onto national forest land can be a major problem in maintaining proper habitat, especially in sensitive areas of the forest.

Providing access to the national forest is something Chaveas hopes will decrease the number of encroachment issues within the Hoosier National Forest. Because the national forest is small, it means that most trails within the forest are multiple use 46108 open to hikers, horses and sometimes mountain bikers. 99155We don163t have the capacity to do anything else, Chaveas said.

Another issue with having a smaller forest is that there are fewer employees to provide everything from recreational help to law enforcement and fire fighting. Although some employees are law enforcement, the Hoosier National Forest also has others who can write tickets and enforce violations. The Hoosier National Forest currently has 57 permanent employees. It also hires seasonal workers, using a mixture of funding sources often with help from other agencies that have partnered with the national forest.

We blend lines quite a bit, Chaveas said, adding that many forest employees can work as firefighters, wildlife and recreation specialists and more.

The Hoosier National Forest utilizes youth it hires mainly in the summer through AmeriCorps and other programs to help fill in some of the gaps. Last year, AmeriCorps workers helped on prescribed burns within the forest.

378252774Thats something this forest does well,11699 Chaveas said of hiring the youth workers. In 2015, there were 28 youth employees working in the Hoosier forest. Chaveas expects to have similar numbers again this summer.

About that timber

Part of a national forest's mission is to provide timber for the local economy. Any time the Hoosier National Forest signs a timber contract, its due to an environmental need of the forest, Chaveas said. That means the timber will be taken out to help improve the forest's health and habitat for native wildlife.

Recently, that has meant cutting down many of the pine trees that were planted during the Depression years. Oftentimes the pines were planted on former farmland as a way to control erosion. Now the plan is to plant more native species to better enrich the soil and provide a more sustainable forest for years to come.

Although selling timber is a controversial topic that often makes headlines, Chaveas is quick to point out that there are no timber operations on 50 percent of the Hoosier National Forest. And that's part of the plan. The rest of the forest does have timber management as part of its strategy.

The areas that will not have trees cut down include old growth forest areas. But some areas will face cuts to help establish early successional forest that provides habitat for many wildlife. The goal is to have a range of forest types, providing habitat and recreational uses for wildlife and people.

The Hoosier National Forest includes the Charles C. Deam Wilderness, which was designated a wilderness in 1982. The nearly 13,000 acres just south of Lake Monroe was once farmed by settlers to Indiana. In 1935 the first land in what is now the wilderness was acquired by the Forest Service. None of the wilderness area will be logged and no wheeled vehicles are allowed in the area. It's really an inspirational story, Chaveas said of the Deam.

#### Funding concerns

Every year the Hoosier National Forest has to plan a budget. It's a concern every year, Chaveas said of the funding aspects of his job.

In the past few years, some of the funds at first designated to the Hoosier National Forest, as well as other forest lands, have been diverted to help fund the huge wildfires that rage out West throughout the summer months. Chaveas said the U.S. Forest Service is trying to change how the major wildfires are funded, but it will take action by officials in Washington to change the funding sources. The proposal would allow the federal government to treat major wildfires in the same way they do natural disasters - tapping special funds set aside for those purposes.

But for now, there is no change. If we have a big fire year, it will still affect funds, Chaveas said. That means that money that has not been spent or is not designated for a certain purpose will be turned over to be used in fighting the wildfires.

Chaveas said that funding for the national forest has remained flat for the last couple of years. But even with no change in funding, Chaveas is confident he and the other workers in the Hoosier National Forest can forge ahead in providing a place for people to visit, wildlife to thrive and the forest to endure.

## Taking charge of Indiana forestlands

