

The “Spotlight”...highlighting researchers at work

KRISTA GEBERT

“The Beauty of Economics”

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“Economics is the science of allocating scarce resources among unlimited wants.” That was Krista Gebert’s response when I asked her to define economics for me. Having taught several economics classes at the University of Montana after graduate school, Krista had the definition down to its essence. As an economist with RMRS in Missoula, Krista applies economics to a variety of scarce forest and human resources. Krista is the newest executive committee member of BEMRP, representing the Human Dimensions Science Program of RMRS.

Krista grew up in and around Dillon, Montana. She inherited a strong work ethic from her parents. After high school, Krista attended two years of college in Dillon in business administration before getting married and starting her family. Her husband, John, is a math and physics teacher. During the early years they lived in Helena, then Chester, Montana. She stayed home with her young sons but she always knew she would eventually go back to school and work. John prepared her by teaching her trigonometry and pre-calculus to boost her math skills. Then a great teaching job came up for John in Missoula.

When her youngest son was 4, Krista went back to school. I asked her why she went into economics. She said she started in business classes, figuring she would go into accounting. “But I felt sick to my stomach every time I opened up my accounting book.” However, economics excited her, and she had always been good at math and science, so despite there being “no jobs” in that field, at least not in Missoula, John encouraged her to switch. So she went for it.

Landing a job with RMRS was “serendipitous.” In 1996, during her last week of graduate school, she applied for a job at the Forestry Sciences Laboratory in a temporary, entry-level economist position. Her



Janie Canton-Thompson (left, former ECO-Report editor) and Krista Gebert. (Photo by Carol Pyle)

supervisor, Erv Schuster, served as her mentor. He gave her lots of responsibility early on, and urged her to move up. “Erv was great. He hired people who could do the job, then left you alone to do it.” Krista held several temporary and term positions until 2000, then moved over to the University for a year and a half working for the Bureau of Business and Economic Research. She enjoyed her time with the Bureau and it was not easy making the decision to go back to RMRS when a permanent job opened up. However, she loves working for the Forest Service and with all the great people she

has met over the years, “I’m impressed with the caliber of people I’ve met and work with in the Forest Service and Department of Interior. They’re dedicated, hard-working, and really involved.”

Krista’s research in the past few years has focused on fire economics, especially wildland fire suppression and suppression costs. One piece of that is providing forecasts for the Forest Service and Department of Interior on what they’re likely to spend on fire suppression for the coming year. The forecasts produced early in the fiscal year in collaboration with researchers at the Southern Research Station use climate information and time trends to make predictions of suppression expenditures for the upcoming fire season. During the summer, personnel at the National Interagency Fire Center in Boise forecast anticipated fire activity using their best professional judgment. Those predictions then go into the economics models that Krista uses to produce monthly updates of anticipated suppression spending. Krista finds her work both rewarding and challenging. “I can email the forecasts of suppression expenditures to the Washington Office at 5:30 at night and the next morning I see it in the paper.” This is nerve-racking (the challenge), but also evidence that her work is actually getting used (the reward). Krista’s

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forecasting work earned her the Forest Service Chief's Award in 2003.

Another rewarding and challenging line of research is the Stratified Cost Index. This compares the estimated cost of the fire with what was actually spent. She reviews costs and sends a list of the fires that cost significantly more than estimated to the Fire and Aviation Management office in Washington, D.C. and they follow up with fire managers to learn why they were so expensive. This results in better tracking of fire expenditures by the fire managers and helps all participants understand what causes higher costs.

Krista is looking forward to working on ecosystem management research with BEMRP. She got a taste for it when she helped out with the Trapper-Bunkhouse project. In a project like that with multiple goals, there are always budget constraints. "That's the beauty of economics; providing information helps managers make decisions about tradeoffs. You can't do everything with the land, you have to make choices," she said. At Trapper-Bunkhouse there are fish culverts to install, trails to fix, hazardous fuels to reduce, roads to rehabilitate, and more. Yet there aren't enough funds to cover all of that. That's where economics comes in to help with those choices.

As a new BEMRP team member, Krista looks forward to branching out into a new realm and working more with field folks. She likes knowing when research she does is applied on the ground. Sometimes, researchers conduct their research, write their journal articles, and are not sure if anyone is actually using the results. That's one of the reasons she likes doing applied research: "Over the years, there's been a lot of direct interaction with management and that's given us a lot of research ideas. Working with managers is how most of our research topics came up, and we can see it put to use." She is excited that being involved with BEMRP will give her the opportunity to do more of this type of collaborative research.

Ward McCaughey . . . (from page 11)

Ward: "Development of the entire hydrology, vegetative, and climate monitoring system on the Experimental Forest has drawn researchers from all over the U.S. to install collaborative studies." He's excited about a new \$36,000 climate station that will collect data on hydrology, atmospheric oxygen, daily and seasonal carbon exchange, snow melt, atmospheric deposition, pH, particulates, and more. Ward has also been approached by the National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration to use Tenderfoot as one of eight sites in the United States to calibrate a Geostationary Satellite Server (GOES) atmospheric weather satellite using climate and snow data.

Setting up experiments and learning from them is intellectually stimulating. "Scientists go into the science field because it's their nature to learn through experimenting," he said. Ward loves working in Forest Service research, explaining, "We have flexibility and latitude in the types of studies we work on."

He also enjoys working with resource managers in the National Forest System, including the Northern Region Office, the Bitterroot National Forest, the Lewis and Clark National Forest, and BEMRP. He says that "Forest Service people are great people to work with. It's the best ecological organization in the world, well-known and respected in Europe because of our research publications and how we manage our forests."

Ward looks forward to the intellectual challenges coming up with the Trapper-Bunkhouse project, Northern Region Aspen Working Group, Whitebark Pine technical committee, and National Experimental Forests Managers Working Group, and ballroom dancing. Ballroom dancing? "I used to dance a lot in Bozeman and I'm looking forward to doing more of it here in Missoula." Ward's advice to everyone is, "Don't sweat the small stuff. Go out and do the best you can." That would apply to work, play, and dancing.

New Publication Available

The Rocky Mountain Research Station's leadership team recently awarded its Outstanding Scientific Publication award to Dean Pearson for his role as principal author and team leader of the publication *Biological Control Agents Elevate Hantavirus by Subsidizing Deer Mouse Populations* (Ecology Letters 9(4): 443-450, published in 2006, co-authored by Ragan Callaway of the University of Montana).

The paper looks at indirect risks of using exotic insects to control weeds. See the 2002-03 ECO-Report for an article about this research and last year's ECO-Report where we reported on an interview with Dean in which he talked about the surprising response to his findings (<http://www.fs.fed.us/rm/ecopartner/ecoreport.shtml>).