



# Mark Twain National Forest

## 2020 – Forest Reflections:



**Despite what many would consider the most challenging year in recent history, Mark Twain National Forest, its staff, its partners and its supportive communities, worked together to have a strong year in 2020.**

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### REDISCOVERING OUTDOOR RECREATION

Hunting, fishing, hiking, OHV-use, horseback riding, camping, canoeing...the list of activities that bring the public to the Forest is substantial. Recreation uses of national forest system land are always popular; but in 2020 the pandemic brought visitors to the

Mark Twain at record levels. On any given weekday, many campgrounds were as full as they would be during a holiday weekend any prior year. It was apparent that people needed these outdoor recreation experiences this year more than ever. Mark Twain was here to serve; and Forest employees worked diligently to incorporate evolving safety guidelines and to open recreation sites as quickly as possible for the public to enjoy. By the beginning of summer, almost all Forest recreation sites were open for visitors to enjoy.

### SPECIAL USES ABOUND

Special use applications balance the needs of the public with the needs of the natural resources to allow people to connect with their Forest lands in a sustainable way. The Forest issued 90 new Special Use Authorizations, completed fourteen Special Use Amendments, and oversaw administration of 1,198 other special use permits.

One unique permit in 2020 was for Ozark Vitality. They are a non-profit organization who utilized their special use permit to film a short documentary on the forest as part of their [My Ozarks video series](#). These videos highlight the social, cultural, natural, and other special characteristics that draw people to the area; and the videos specifically demonstrate how important Mark Twain National Forest is to the many people living in and visiting this part of Missouri.

A large Special Uses Permit (SUP) modification was also completed with Ameren for electric line maintenance, allowing the company to continue its critical mission of delivering power to many of our Forest's neighboring communities.



### **INNOVATING WITH PARTNERS IN FORESTRY**

The Forest has a cooperative relationship with other natural resource managers and the forest product industry in Missouri. Timber harvesting helps the Forest bring landscapes to a more resilient condition by restoring habitats and preventing destructive wildfires. To keep this relationship healthy during the pandemic, the Forest processed 60 extensions for timber contracts this summer, giving contractors additional time, making it possible to still accomplish this vital work.

There were many other examples of innovation on Mark Twain National Forest in 2020. Forest personnel adopted the use of an electronic filing system for the Forest's timber sale administration program to streamline the process and improve bidders' experience. Forest staff also began using tablets for sale inspection reports to expedite data entry. A new ecological damage assessment tool was created this year to aid law enforcement in the prosecution of trespass and timber theft cases and establishing appropriate restitution. At the same time, the Forest kept a resource conservation emphasis through its strong partnership with Missouri Department of Conservation (MDC) and ensured alignment with market/industry trends through its communications with partners.

### **STORM SALVAGE**

In less than a year, the Forest has taken a new management tool from concept to reality. The Disturbance Decision and Environmental Assessment (EA) was completed in 2020. This Decision allows for better recovery of the Forest after flooding events, ice storms, wind events, or other large-scale disasters. Implementation of this new tool was completed with Forest Service Eastern Regional support. The Disturbance Decision will help the Forest recover much more quickly from future natural disasters, which is also more fiscally efficient. The benefits and need of this EA were made apparent when a storm event in May 2020 resulted in blowdown across three of the six Ranger Districts on

the Forest. Employees responded quickly and spent five weeks clearing downed trees and debris from Forest roads. Now, already, there are four sales awarded and agreements made on seven existing sales to remove and salvage the downed trees. Normally, this could take up to 1-2 years, or even not at all due to the decay of the trees.



**1: Many trees were uprooted by the May 2020 windstorms as seen here on Forest Road 497.**

### **PARTNERSHIPS PROVE VITAL TO HOG ELIMINATION**

The Forest aligned our land management with the Feral Hog Elimination Partnership strategy to eliminate feral hogs from Missouri by successfully implementing a Feral Swine closure order that was signed December 7, 2019. Eradication efforts across state and federal agencies were coordinated through an incident command structure, utilizing multi-agency management and coordination techniques devel-



oped through wildland firefighting. The increased efforts and focus on elimination resulted in 12,538 feral swine removed from the landscape in calendar year 2020. Forest employees were trained and certified, in partnership with USDA Wildlife Services, and many took on this additional duty to support these critical removal activities.

### **BRINGING BACK THE BROWN HEADED NUTHATCH**

In conjunction with partners that include MDC, Northern Research Station, Ozark St. Francis and Ouachita National Forest, Mark Twain National Forest has reintroduced Brown Headed Nuthatch, a bird species that had been lost to Missouri for almost a century. Through decades of forest restoration activities culminating with targeted work under the Missouri Shortleaf Pine Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Project (CFLRP), enough contiguous, suitable habitat to support the Brown Headed Nuthatch was in place to proceed with reintroductions in 2020. To date, 35 birds have been placed with a two-year goal of 100 birds. The new population of birds will continue to be monitored; and restoration work supporting this habitat will continue in areas around the Forest.



**2: The Brownheaded Nuthatches were carefully banded on the day of release to facilitate future monitoring of this newly returned species.**

### **UTILIZING PRESCRIBED FIRE FOR SUSTAINABLE FORESTS AND WILDFIRE RESISTANT COMMUNITIES**

The forest fuels program gained experience working with private landowners on risk reduction programs beyond traditional prescribed burning activities in 2020. A prime example was the Forest finalizing the [Missouri Adjacent Lands in Valley Springs for Wildland Urban Interface Agreement](#), signed with Reynolds County to provide fuel breaks and safe access to the Valley Springs Youth Ranch. Another example is the adjacent land hazardous fuels reduction project in Washington County. The Forest entered into agreements with more than 20 adjacent landowners to use fire for mutual benefit to support prescribed fire and forest restoration efforts in 2020, thereby improving firefighter safety by increasing the reach of our restoration efforts on private lands.

These projects are examples of how the Forest Service worked with residents, county officials, and local fire departments to make communities much more resistant to wildfires, and much more ready to battle any that occur. Prescribed burning in these fire-dependent ecosystems has many ecological benefits too. In 2020, one special prescribed burning project was utilized as a conservation management tool to specifically improve habitat needed to support the endangered Hines Emerald Dragonfly within the Barton Fen complex.



**3: Shaded fuel breaks look beautiful and serve the function of fire prevention.**



### **Forest management and restoration**

Mark Twain National Forest awarded 27 timber contracts with approximately 66.5 million board feet (MMBF) of timber volume sold in fiscal year 2020 (FY20). Another important accomplishment in FY20 was 4,397 acres being brought in line with management goals through timber harvest.

Employees also conducted surveys on 5,287 acres to determine current vegetation makeup and survival rates of previous plantations. Planting of trees occurred across 903 acres; and site preparation on another 1,015 acres occurred in FY20. Non-native invasive species (NNIS) were also reduced through multiple methods. Managed goat grazing continues to be one very effective tool in fighting invasive plants and it was utilized in the Tumbling Creek area this year to enhance watershed protection.

Surveys conducted by Heritage Program specialists ensure operations stay in line with historic preservation laws and help preserve the important cultural legacy of the Forest. In FY20, approximately 23,500 acres of land were surveyed for National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) Section 106 compliance; and 189 acres were surveyed under NHPA Section 110.

The Mark Twain Fire program safely accomplished 25,128 acres of prescribed fire this past year as well. Along with other timber treatments this totaled 40,358 acres where forest land was made healthier and more resistant to devastating wildfire.

### **FIGHTING WILDFIRES**

At home, Mark Twain National Forest firefighters responded to 101 wildfires in 2020; and their quick response kept the total area burned below five thousand acres. The Forest helped deploy hundreds of qualified individuals to respond to devastating wildfires across the western United States, which experienced record-smashing wildfires this year. Missouri-Iowa Interagency Coordination Center (MOCC), staffed by Mark Twain National Forest fire personnel, dispatched two 20-person handcrews, 29 fire engines, and more than 350 other individuals to help fight these raging wildfires.

These wildland firefighters came from Mark Twain National Forest and other state and federal partners from across Iowa and Missouri. Anyone dispatched from MOCC received regular briefings to keep them updated on COVID precautions, and everyone exercised these practices to mitigate risk of spread. Wearing masks, minimizing unnecessary physical contact, washing hands dutifully, and using the “module-as-one” concept were all measures that these wildland firefighters successfully implemented. This helped everyone in the program continue to stay as healthy as possible to provide support to the West during a busy season, and not a single Mark Twain National Forest employee was infected by COVID-19 during these travels despite the rigorous work.

### **RIVERTON EAST – BOAT RAMP RESTORATION**

The Forest completed rehabilitation of the Riverton East River Access site along the Eleven Point Scenic River, which had been severely damaged in the 2017 flood. Mark Twain National Forest engineers worked closely with contractors to revitalize the Riverton East boat launch this year. Improvements at the site will allow water enthusiasts to enjoy launching their fishing boats, kayaks, and canoes for decades to come.

The project restored water access points that were undercut and damaged from the flood event. The parking area was also repaved to make watercraft launching a smooth experience for visitors.





### **NORTH FORK BOAT RAMP FINALIZED**

Another site severely damaged in the 2017 flood has finished its long road to recovery. This popular recreation destination lies about 16 miles to the west of West Plains, MO. The new watercraft launch at North Fork of the White River (known locally as Hammonds Camp) will be open for users in 2021. This site improvements will increase user safety since the waterplay area is now physically separated from where watercraft are launched.



### **KEEPING RIDERS ON THE RIGHT PATH**

Riding off-highway vehicles (OHVs) on non-designated routes damages natural resources on the Forest, a growing problem in many areas where user-created routes have expanded. Recently, the Mark Twain National Forest has developed a working relationship with Mo-Moto, a non-profit organization that promotes responsible OHV recreation in the State of Missouri. This new relationship has already proven fruitful as the Forest has benefitted from Mo-Moto's participation with trash clean-up projects and an increase in rider knowledge of regulations through Mo-Moto's own social media posts. The group worked with other partners to remove 10 tons of trash from the Forest last year. Meanwhile, the Forest continues to work on engineering solutions to assist law enforcement in keeping motorized riders on designated routes. Some Districts have higher concentrations of non-compliant use and have developed strategies to focus in those areas exhibiting the greatest damage to both natural resources and non-motorized trails. The Forest is

asking the public to spread the word and let people know they should only "Ride On" designated trails. Learn more about why this is so important on the Tread Lightly website at [www.treadlightly.org/campaigns/ride-on/](http://www.treadlightly.org/campaigns/ride-on/).

### **COVID-19 RESPONSE**

The Forest continued to serve the public during the pandemic by adopting safety practices which followed federal and state guidance. A pandemic coordinator was identified for the Forest who ensured that proper personal protective equipment (PPE) was distributed and that everyone knew the procedures to follow to continue offering excellent customer service in a safe way. Front desks increased virtual customer support; but also found ways to help those that had to stop by in person. Some facility modifications have been requested and planned under the CARES Act in order to provide enhanced mitigation measures for the health and safety of customers and Forest customer service representatives, now and into the future.





## EXPANDING OUR CAPABILITIES TO SERVE THROUGH PARTNERSHIPS

Last year, Forest heritage professionals travelled to Red Rock, OK, to assist with an in-person paraprofessional training hosted by the Otoe-Missouria Tribe. Following COVID travel restrictions, Forest staff collaborated with other national forests in the South and Southwest to develop and deliver a separate three-day remote paraprofessional training for employees and affiliated Tribal members.

The program also allows for the same training and certification to be provided to members of federally recognized Tribes. Tribal paraprofessional crews can serve on-call to increase a forest's on-the-ground capacity to conduct heritage surveys under the supervision of a heritage professional. Over 40,000 acres have been surveyed in Regions 8 and 9, using Tribal crews. Forest management goals are accomplished, and bridges of trust and collaboration are built with our Tribal partners.

## VOLUNTEERS AND PARTNERS INCREASING CAPACITY

Ozark Trail Association (OTA) engaged its members to provide the Forest with much-needed help after the spring windstorms. OTA volunteers gave a total of 800 hours of their time and cleared hundreds of trees that had fallen across 90 miles of the Ozark Trail—this was in addition to all the other volunteer time the group donated for regular trail maintenance activities. A new group joined the ranks of Forest recreation partners in 2020—the Central Missouri Trail Association (COMOTA). This group held multiple trail cleanup and improvement events this past year around the Houston/Rolla/Cedar Creek Ranger District with about 300 volunteer hours of service. Of course, Backcountry Horsemen of Missouri chapters did amazing work across the Forest and cleared many trails at the end of spring, giving more than 1,100 hours of volunteer time. Forest visitors truly benefited from the work of all our volunteer groups.

Through a partnership with Mt. Adams Institute, the

Forest hosted four Veterans in 2020. This group gave 3,900 cumulative hours of service in a variety of positions. Other active-duty military members from Fort Leonard Wood assisted the Forest through volunteer agreements and career transition programs. These win-win programs allowed Veterans to gain experience and transition into the workforce, and they brought excellent skills with them that benefited the Forest in serving the public.

The ACES program gave retirees an opportunity to apply their years of wisdom toward specific projects requiring their expertise, while programs like Greening Youth brought young individuals to the Forest to gain knowledge and find new opportunities. The Resource Assistance Program also presented another opportunity for those transitioning into a new career to work in an internship-like capacity.

Ozark Vitality, Sustainable Ozark Partnership, Meramec Regional Planning Commission, multiple chambers of commerce, and many more groups worked with the Forest in 2020 to grow a strong sense of community and an appreciation for public lands in areas in and around the Forest. The Forest continues to meet with a group of diverse stakeholders to share information and ideas, and this collaborative group was a great source for Recreation Site Analysis feedback in 2020.

Mark Twain National Forest wants to thank all our wonderful partners that help so much in the successful management of national forest lands.

## ON THE MOVE

- ◆ **Gina Owens** is the new Regional Forester for the Forest Service Eastern Region (R9), located in Milwaukee, WI.
- ◆ **Theresa Davidson**, previously the Forest Wildlife Biologist, was selected to be the Forest Collaboration and Planning Staff Officer.
- ◆ **Jon Stansfield**, Poplar Bluff District Ranger, has taken a position in Nevada, to be the Deputy Forest Supervisor for the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest.
- ◆ **Clint Davis**, Salem District Ranger, has taken a position as a district ranger on the Ouachita Na-



tional Forest in Arkansas.

- ◆ **Lon Henderson**, from the Tahoe National Forest in California, is serving as the Acting Deputy Forest Supervisor through March 2021 while Tony Crump serves as Acting Forest Supervisor on the Shawnee National Forest.

**A MESSAGE FROM THE FOREST SUPERVISOR**

“The amazing individuals that work on Mark Twain National Forest always impress me. This year their service was even more remarkable, given everything that has gone on with COVID-19. Our team and our partners have adapted and continued to produce and serve. They worked hard to keep each other safe during critical work like fighting wildfires, conducting forest restoration activities, and managing recreation sites and trails. I also want to thank everyone who visited the Forest this year. While it took us some time to be as responsive as we’d like to be due to the pandemic, I appreciate your patience. Most of all, I hope you will return to enjoy the Forest under less stressful times.”

— Forest Supervisor Sherri Schwenke

**MEMORIAL**



We as a Forest remember and honor Greg Pugh, a Forest Service employee that lived to serve the public. He was taken from the world too soon by a tragic vehicle accident on June 6, 2020.

*Thank you, Greg Pugh, for your love of forestry and dedication to public service. You will be greatly missed by everyone that worked with you on Mark Twain National Forest.*

