

# So you want to be a Fed?

A primer on federal employment in  
ecology and environmental science

Sarah Converse and Mark Scheuerell

Washington Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Center

University of Washington

# A bit about our journeys

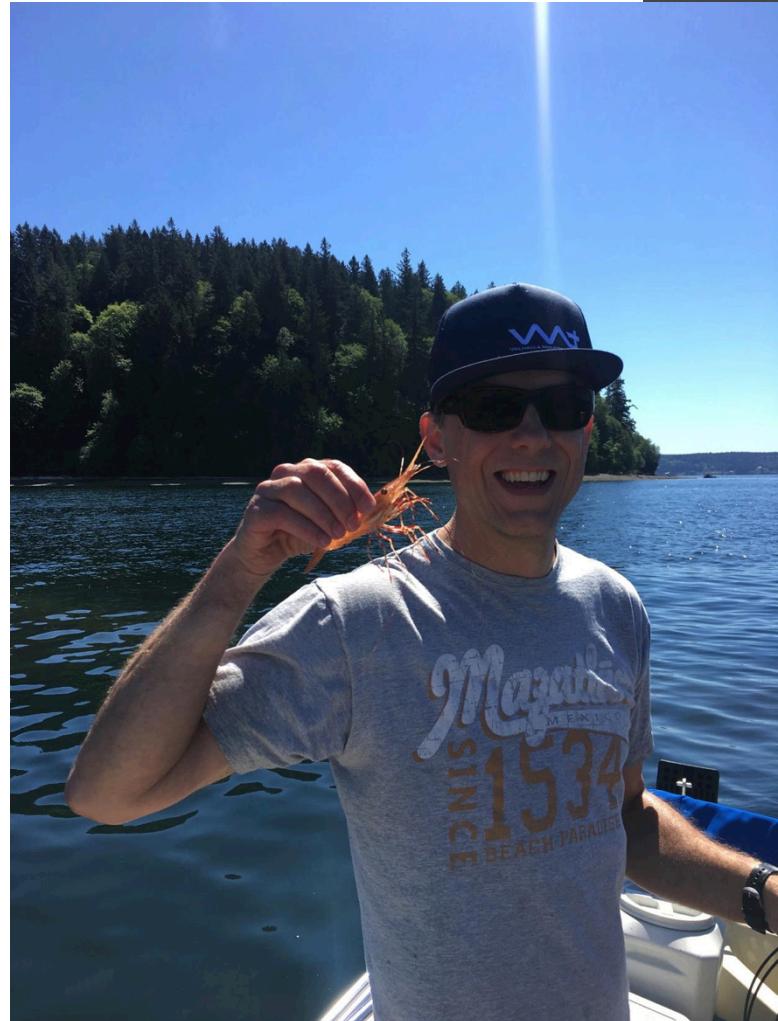
# Sarah Converse

- Education
  - BS – Fisheries and Wildlife, Michigan State University
  - MS – Natural Resource Sciences, University of Nebraska
  - PhD – Fish and Wildlife Ecology, Colorado State University
- Post-doc – Colorado Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit/Patuxent Wildlife Research Center
- Research Ecologist, Quantitative Research Group, USGS Patuxent Wildlife Research Center (2007 – 2017)
  - Ran a research program on endangered species population ecology and management
- Unit Leader and Associate Professor, Washington Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit (2017 – present)



# Mark Scheuerell

- Education
  - BS – Zoology, University of Wisconsin
  - MS – Fishery and Aquatic Science, Cornell University
  - PhD – Zoology, University of Washington
- Post-doc – UW School of Aquatic and Fishery Sciences
- Research Fisheries Biologist, Ecosystem Analysis Program, NOAA Northwest Fishery Science Center (2003 – 2019)
  - Ran a research program on the status assessment of endangered and commercially important species
- Assistant Unit Leader and Associate Professor, Washington Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit (2019 – present)



# Where are career opportunities in environmental sciences?

- Academia
  - Larger, research focused schools
  - Smaller, teaching focused schools
  - Public versus private

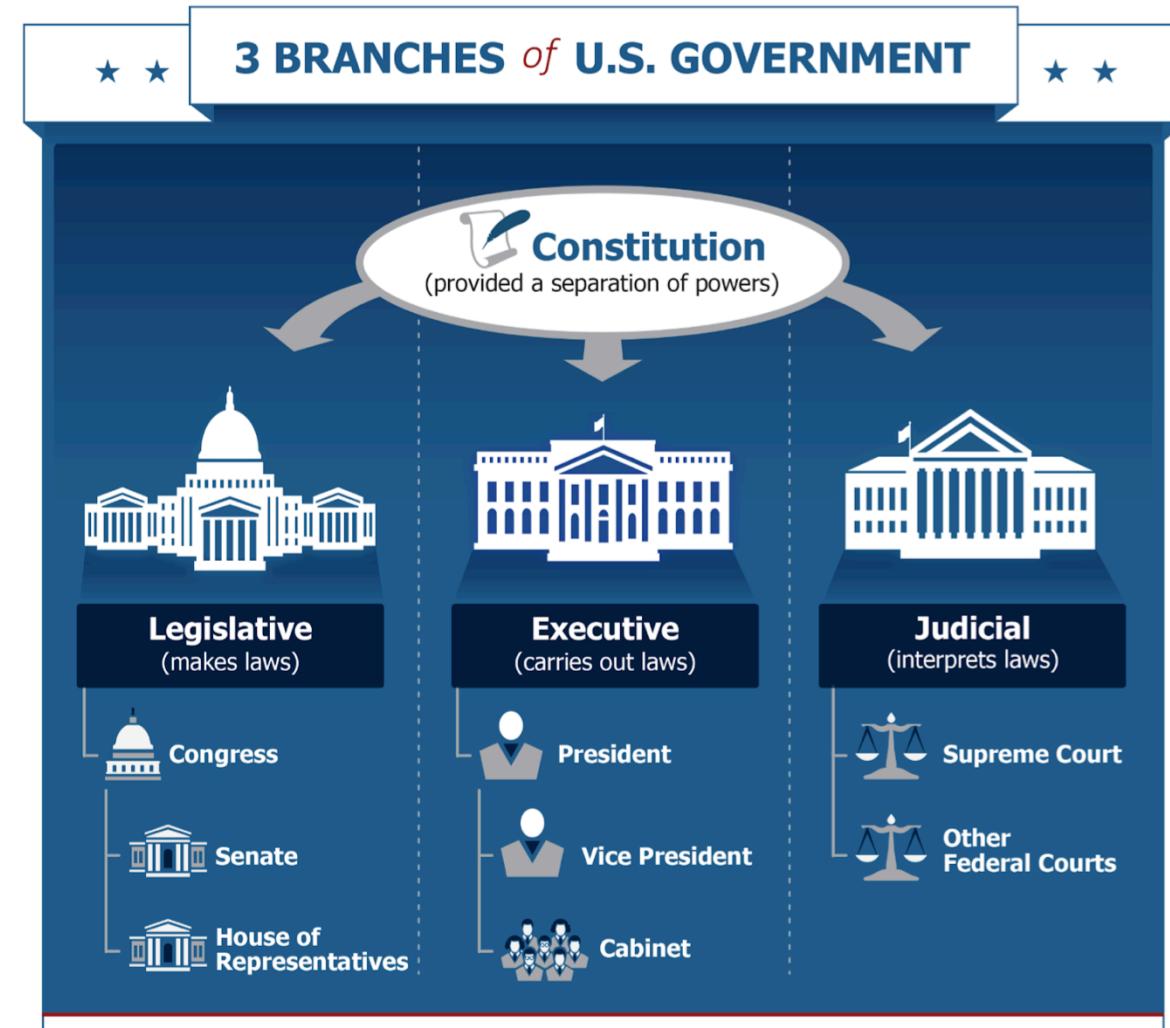
# Where are career opportunities in environmental sciences?

- Consulting
  - Self
  - Larger companies
- Non-profit organizations
  - Puget Sound Restoration Fund
  - Nature Conservancy
- For-profit companies
  - Amazon
  - Disney

# Where are career opportunities in environmental sciences?

- Native American Tribes / First Nations
- State and municipal government
- Federal government (We'll focus here)

# Where are the jobs?



# Where are the jobs?

- Department of Interior
  - Research Bureau: USGS
  - Management Bureaus: USFWS, NPS, BOR, BLM, BOEM
- Department of Agriculture
  - Research and Management: USFS, APHIS, NRCS
- Department of Commerce
  - Research and Management: NOAA
- Department of Defense
  - Management: Natural Resources Program
- EPA: Research and Management

# Where are the jobs?

- NASA
- NSF
- Smithsonian
- Others...
- Special hiring programs
  - Presidential Management Fellows, Pathways
- Contract Positions

# Pros & cons of federal employment

- Pros
  - Security
  - Excellent benefits (health insurance, pension, 401K)
  - Good people (caring, ethical)
- Cons
  - Rigorous structure (Org charts, procedures, forms)
  - Potentially limited scope
  - Slow to change
  - Restrictions on your activities

# Kinds of federal positions

- Research vs Management positions
  - Research promotions based on
    - Independence
    - Originality
    - Impact
    - Stature
  - Management promotions based on
    - Position openings
    - Production of your team/program
  - Ceilings differ
- Permanent vs Term positions

# Funding

- Federal appropriations
  - Money from Congress
  - Arrives each year (usually late)
  - Hard to do long-term planning
- Internal competitive sources
  - Compete against your agency colleagues
  - Can offer you some freedom
- External competitive sources
  - Compete against other individuals/orgs
  - Can offer you some freedom

# Ethics and federal employment

- Civil service
  - You work for the taxpayers
  - Do what's best for everyone
- Advocacy
  - Optics matter
  - Be aware of *perceived* conflicts of interests
- Political activity
  - Hatch Act restricts what/where/when you can do

# Getting a Federal Job

- USAJobs.gov - the site for all federal jobs
- Merit Promotion, Veterans, and other specialized paths vs. Public (US citizens)
- Job series and educational requirements
  - Federal positions are advertised in one or more job series, and educational requirements are determined by the series
- GS level (Z level in NOAA)
  - Research positions will generally start at GS-12 or above and offer promotion to GS-15 within the position
  - Non-research positions will generally be capped at a specific grade
- Example - the ad for my current position:
  - Research Wildlife Biologist / Fish Biologist / Ecologist, GS- 0482 / 0486 / 0408-13/14/15, BB-MP

# Getting a Federal Job



OPM.GOV

ABOUT

POLICY

INSURANCE

RETIREMENT

SUITABILITY

OPM.gov Main > Policy > Classification & Qualifications > General Schedule Qualification Standards

## IN THIS SECTION

Assessment & Selection

## Classification & Qualifications

### GENERAL SCHEDULE QUALIFICATION STANDARDS

Classification & Qualifications

Classifying General Schedule Positions

Classifying Federal Wage System Positions

General Schedule Qualification Policies

General Schedule Qualification Standards

Federal Wage System Qualifications

#### Ecology Series, 0408

##### Individual Occupational Requirements

##### Basic Requirements

**Degree:** biology, or a related field of science underlying ecological research that included at least 30 semester hours in basic and applied biological sciences. These hours must have included at least 9 semester hours in ecology, and 12 semester hours in physical and mathematical sciences.

# Getting a Federal Job

## Tips

- Start a USAJobs account and set up alerts (Save Search)
- Reaching out to human resources (or hiring officials)
- Upload a resume vs. Build a resume
- Cover letters
- Document everything - take nothing for granted

# Getting a Federal Job

## Tips

- Document everything - take nothing for granted

Sarah J. Converse, Ph.D.

List of Coursework

&

Fulfillment of Requirements for Research Ecologist

**BASIC REQUIREMENTS**

1. Degree in biology and related fields

B.S. in Fisheries and Wildlife, Michigan State University  
M.S. in Natural Resource Sciences, University of Nebraska  
Ph.D. in Wildlife Biology, Colorado State University

2. 30 semester hours in basic and applied biological sciences, including 9 semester hours in ecology (\*denotes an ecology course)

Total hours earned: 73

Total hours earned in ecology: 18

Relevant courses include:

Course	Title	Institution	Cr
BS 110	Organisms and Populations	Michigan State Univ.	4
BS 111	Cells and Molecules	Michigan State Univ.	4
FOR 204	Forest Vegetation	Michigan State Univ.	4
FW 203*	Resource Ecology	Michigan State Univ.	3
FW 205	Principles of Fish and Wildlife Management	Michigan State Univ.	3
FW 364*	Ecosystem Processes	Michigan State Univ.	3
FW 410	Upland Ecosystem Management	Michigan State Univ.	4
FW 424	Population Analysis and Management	Michigan State Univ.	4
FW 444	Conservation Biology	Michigan State Univ.	3
ZOL 250*	Ecology	Michigan State Univ.	4
ZOL 228	Comparative Anatomy and Biology of Vertebrates	Michigan State Univ.	4

# Closing thoughts...

- Talk to people about their jobs - experiences are very diverse
- Consider a variety of hiring paths (PMF or Pathways, term positions or post-docs, contract positions, etc.)
- Be prepared to accept some frustrating bureaucratic realities, but recognize there are lots of benefits