

From **TORTOISES** *to* **TRANSMISSION LINES**

KRISTI WISE'S CAREER TAKES UNCONVENTIONAL ROUTE



If you had asked Kristi Wise in 1999, when she began working at Burns & McDonnell, what her job would be like in 12 years, her answer might have more to do with gopher tortoises than transmission lines.

With a pedigree in wildlife biology, Wise, a project manager in the Burns & McDonnell Environmental Studies & Permitting (ES&P) Group, imagined she'd spend her time interacting with animals, not upset landowners. But today, she specializes in transmission line routing, finding the optimal route to connect power generation sources to the point of consumption via the national power grid.

In the Wild

Wise's love of wildlife was fostered at an early age through family camping trips to national and state parks in Kansas, Missouri and Colorado.

"We'd go out at dusk looking for deer and beavers. I'd just sit outside getting eaten by mosquitoes, watching beavers build their dams," she says. "At the time, I wanted to be a park ranger."

Her love for nature led her to study wildlife biology at Kansas State University. She went on to raise 60 coyote pups en route to earning her master's degree in 1996 from Utah State.

After college, Wise worked as a field coordinator for the Missouri Department of Conservation in St. Louis, where she participated in the Urban Deer Project, tracking the movements of deer in the city's suburbs. The opportunity of a permanent job and the chance to move back home to Overland Park, Kan., brought her to Burns & McDonnell.

Wise spent her first several months at Burns & McDonnell as a wildlife biologist, completing wildlife surveys, studying bald eagles, gopher tortoises and more. But it wasn't long before her career took a different turn.

Route Change

As the company's transmission and distribution work increased in the late 1990s, demand expanded for people to complete routing studies to research the environmental impact of transmission line projects and prepare clients for the permitting process. Wise accepted the challenge.

"In our division, you need to be a jack of all trades," Wise says. "Transmission line routing is one of our bread-and-butter-type projects, and we needed people to do the work."

Wise learned the routing ropes from Cyril Welter, a project manager in ES&P who retired from Burns & McDonnell in 2010 after 30 years with the firm. "Cyril taught me everything there is to know about transmission lines," Wise says. "My career here is because of him."

"She is the calm in the storm when everything's going crazy around her."

Welter says Wise was a fast learner due, in part, to her background in biology. "She brought with her knowledge of statistical methods and mapping systems that helped her get up to speed quickly," he says. "She got a grasp of what the significant issues were early on."

Dale Trott, senior vice president, agrees that Wise's experience in wildlife biology helped her transition easily to the transmission line routing field.

"Kristi is very analytical. She is good at coming up with quantifications and understands the complexity of transmission line routing work," he says. "She's also very bright and very adaptable. She's willing to learn new things, yet she has her own style of doing things."

Adding to the complexities of finding the best route for a transmission line project, these projects often face significant opposition. Wise frequently interacts with stakeholders at public meetings, and she has

defended projects with testimony during utility hearings.

Jim Hogan, vice president in the Transmission & Distribution Group, worked with Wise on the Middletown-Norwalk Project for Northeast Utilities in Connecticut. "Kristi is really good at public meetings," Hogan says. "She is the calm in the storm when everything's going crazy around her."

The Right Place

Although it's not the dream she had in her childhood, Wise is pleased with the way her career has panned out. "I really do like the opportunities I've been given and the challenges in transmission line routing," she says. "I know a lot more about transmission lines now than I do wildlife."

Wise's counterparts at Burns & McDonnell and her clients agree she's a perfect fit for the job.

"When clients get into a bind and need something in a hurry, she always manages to get things turned around in a very prompt manner. They appreciate that," says Mark Van Dyne, marketing director in ES&P.

Kelly Harrison, vice president of transmission at Westar Energy in Topeka, Kan., recalls working with Wise on a 345-kV transmission line project in Kansas from Wichita to Hutchinson to Salina in late 2006. Harrison says the 100-mile project was initially planned as two phases, but midstream was combined into one project to be completed within the same year-end deadline.

"Kristi brought in extra resources and worked through the holidays, and we were able to complete the job on time," Harrison says. "At the end of the day, she went over, above and beyond the call of duty, met the deadline, and submitted a great report."

These days, Wise hasn't lost her love for wildlife. She still enjoys spending her free time camping with family. Her favorite camping spots are close to home, at Wallace State Park and Truman Lake in Missouri, where she always finds plenty of deer, beavers and mosquitoes.

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