Minnesota DNR Enforcement Names New Chief Pilot

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The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources Enforcement Division has named Conservation Officer/Pilot Tom Buker its chief pilot. He had been the acting chief pilot since October 2013. Buker will assume the permanent position and be promoted to captain Oct. 8.

“Officer Buker brings strong leadership skills, experience, and a high standard of professionalism with him to serve the pilots of the DNR,” said Col. Ken Soring, DNR enforcement director.

Buker, based in New Ulm, joined the DNR in 2004. As chief pilot, he will oversee four full-time and two part-time pilots based from airports in Bemidji, Brainerd, Grand Rapids and New Ulm. The DNR owns and operates six fixed-wing aircraft and three helicopters.

A licensed pilot since 1997, Buker has 17 years flying experience, amassed more than 4,500 hours flight time, and is an instrument rated single and multi-engine (land) flight instructor with tail wheel and ski plane endorsement.

Prior to joining the DNR, Buker was a patrol officer, special weapons and tactics team member, deputy coroner and K-9 search and rescue officer with the Douglas County (Nevada) Sheriff’s Department from 1989-1996. He has a Bachelor of Science degree in Commercial Aviation from the University of North Dakota. He also worked as a patrol office and investigator with the Mahnomen County (Minnesota) Sheriff’s Department and served as a military police officer in the U.S. Army.

The DNR Enforcement Aviation Section flew 1,940 hours in fiscal year 2014 (July 1, 2013 – June 30, 2014) for the DNR divisions of enforcement (306.6), wildlife (1,004), fisheries (158.9), forestry (108.8), pilot training (285.1), and others (4.6). Flights included wetland flights, waterfowl and large animal surveys, wolf telemetry, fingerling drops, creel surveys and search and rescue missions.

The DNR’s aviation program started in 1947 with a plane based in Baudette that covered the whole state. A second aircraft, a float plane, was added in 1948 and based in Warroad. Prior to 1947, the state borrowed or rented aircraft for specific flight operations.