

## **Meet Richard A. “Rick” Foltman, CCM, Specialist-meteorologist at Detroit Edison, Detroit, MI**

### **How did you first get interested in weather?**

I grew up in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. The “U P” is known for its winter snow and cold weather and beautiful natural areas. I grew up on the “Banana Belt” side which turned out to be the non-lake-effect snow side. As a child we spent much time camping and traveling when my Dad wasn’t teaching high school. We saw a lot of the outdoors and many different weather events while flying kites, fishing and bicycle riding. I gained a great appreciation for the weather. The weather was all around me calling.



**Figure 1. Richard A. Foltman CCM**

On one vacation trip, we “weathered” visiting relatives in New York during the remnants of Hurricane Agnes. It rained so much the local ants were trying to seek shelter in our trailer by walking up the electrical cord. There was another instance when we had a strong dust devil or funnel cloud blow over our neighborhood. Leaves and debris were swirling and flying in circles everywhere. There were shingles and dust but no observed funnel or tornado. My interest was tweaked and the seed was planted.

### **How did you find your first job, and what was it like?**

I had several temporary, part-time weather-related jobs while in school that gave me a taste of my career field. My first full-time position took a little effort but finally came down to “connections”. Initially, I sent out over 100 resumes and job letters to various companies in the field to see what was out there. Not many companies advertised for positions but this did provide me with several trips and two job offers in upstate New York and San Diego areas. I was glad to get several offers but the third and final job offer came while I was still considering the other two. I had worked on an acid deposition project for Detroit Edison through the University of Michigan and they were looking for someone with air quality background. After interviewing and considering the offer, I decided to stay in the Great Lakes area.

### **How would you describe your current job and how is it different from your forecasting job?**

Detroit Edison is the largest utility in Michigan. In a large utility with over two million electric customers, there are many different aspects of meteorology but often only small pieces at a time. I hired in to do more air quality and air pollution

modeling work. Over the years this changed with needs of the company. Over several years I encouraged management of the company to use a “meteorologist” for weather forecasting, consultation and warnings. After several years and one “big storm”, I was finally offered the opportunity to create the position. However once given the position I finally realized the responsibilities were greater than expected and the time involved was beyond the scope of the 8 to 5 business day and the work week.

There are many aspects of “utility” meteorology. Forecasting is the tip of the iceberg. Storm alerts, conference calls and emergency preparedness are all part of a continuous effort to improve and inform. With the nature of weather there is always room for improvement. Legal cases and claims against the company provide some investigative work. Support of the nuclear and fossil generation facilities provides different directions and levels of interpretations. We have a small mesoscale meteorological network which needs support and maintenance. This has also helped with wind generation potential in the area. There is also a constant need to stay abreast and keep people informed of changing conditions.

I also provide some consulting services after hours. Consulting has provided me additional opportunities to grow and experience other aspects of meteorology. This has included forensic meteorology, observing, rainfall insurance and transportation issues. By keeping abreast of the technology I have been able to utilize my expertise in various areas.

### **Is forecasting the weather part of your job anymore?**

On a daily basis, I still spend the first couple hours creating a general severe weather “risk” forecast for the distribution side of the company. This forecast looks at the severe weather risk going out five days. Adverse weather due to high wind, severe thunderstorms or ice accumulation plays havoc with the distribution portion of the electrical system. IF there is adverse weather going on for a given day, the daily work plan will definitely change. People rely on an accurate forecast to make day-to-day decisions for regular field work as well. I have also had the opportunity to develop several automated forecasts which aid me in forecasting weather conditions.

### **What would you say to those interested in working in the private sector?**

Whether in the private sector or not, the key thing is still the weather. I think the “love” or passion for weather lives in all meteorologists. This passion for the unknown and changing weather will make working anywhere easier. Not everyone can be a storm chaser but we can all benefit from their observations and knowledge. While the quote, “Everybody talks about the weather but nobody does anything about it,” may not be necessarily true for meteorologists, it is one common factor that impacts everyone like death and taxes.

The private sector has many unique opportunities. Often these opportunities are not always posted in the weekend newspaper or on job search websites. There are many niches where meteorologists with good communication and technical skills can fit right in. My career started with air quality meteorology and has changed to more applied meteorology and storm forecasting over the years. If I wasn't able to adapt to the changing technology and communicate to management, then I would have been out of a job years ago.

Often various industries like having someone they can rely upon for open, honest, hardworking employees with the company's needs and interests in mind and not just their own. It often means asking a lot of questions to determine what the critical factors are and how the weather "fits" or will influence the decisions being made. It means asking if the forecast is for a major grid shutdown or someone's golf tee time.

Flexibility and continued growth will be necessary in the years to come as technology changes and business needs change. It, more or than not, often comes down to the bottom line. If a benefit and cost savings can be made for the meteorological work being completed then the job is worthwhile. Often it is a matter of finding that benefit.

There are many different needs in the private sector that are waiting to be met. Find an area you are interested in, get trained in that area and pursue your goals.



**Figure 2. DTE Energy promotion photo.**