Kelly Savoie (00:00):

Hello, Clear Skies Ahead listeners. This is Kelly Savoie, and I'm hoping you can take a moment of your time to rate and review our show wherever you listen to podcasts. We have produced over 100 episodes, and you can help us reach even more individuals that will benefit from the diverse experiences shared by our guests. Thanks so much for listening, and I hope you enjoy this new episode.

Welcome to the American Meteorological Society's podcast series, Clear Skies Ahead: Conversations About Careers in Meteorology and Beyond. I'm Kelly Savoie, and I'm here with Emma Collins, and we'll be your hosts. We're excited to give you the opportunity to step into the shoes of an expert working in weather, water, and climate sciences.

Emma Collins (00:54):

We're happy to introduce today's guest, Matthew Rogers, president and co-founder of Commodity Weather Group in Bethesda, Maryland. Welcome, Matt. Thanks so much for joining us today.

Matt Rogers (01:02):

Thanks for having me. Appreciate taking the time to talk with me.

Kelly Savoie (01:07):

Matt, could you tell us a little bit about what sparked your interest in meteorology and how it influenced your educational path?

Matt Rogers (01:15):

Yeah, I feel like I've always loved meteorology. The weather, it just was always fascinating to me, and I can't think of a time when I didn't love it and want to be involved in the weather and climate space there. But I grew up in a small state, Delaware, where I'm still at today actually, and it's very flat land here. Delaware's very flat. There's a lot of big sky, you've got coastal interaction. There's so much exciting weather in this area growing up. It really spiked my interest in meteorology. And it was tricky because I didn't have a lot of options for my educational path from here, because at the time, University of Delaware wasn't doing a meteorology program. They are today. And Penn State was out of state for me. It was quite expensive and finances were tough. And I had other interests too.

(02:08):

I was interested in journalism a little bit and business management somewhat as well. My dad was running a business. And so what was interesting to me is that ultimately my career ended up... I'm doing all three of those now in the role that I play. So it was kind of nice that it all worked out, but I did figure out a way to get to Penn State and that's where I went to get my meteorology degree and it was so worth it. I'm so glad I had that opportunity.

Emma Collins (02:32):

While in school, were you aware of all the industries, including non-meteorological industries that hire meteorology graduates or was that something you discovered on your own?

Matt Rogers (02:41):

I had to pretty much discover that on my own, and it was really interesting. When I went to school, I was thinking the TV route or the National Weather Service or research, those were kind of all the thoughts that I had. I knew of some maybe with the airlines or aviation weather in general, and I also was aware of maybe air pollution modeling a little bit too. I think there was a group that would come to Penn State and interview and that made me aware of it, but really didn't discover all the other options that were out there. I had to do that on my own. Since I left Penn State and graduated in 1994 with my bachelor's degree, in the mid to late '90s, they started surveying us about what would be great for their program. They did start to build in, which- an important component I think is risk management, and they started to build that in, how it affects commodities and some other industries like insurance.

(03:38):

And so it did open the door for future students to become aware of these other industries that were out there. So it has changed quite a bit. I think a lot of university programs do that now that they didn't do back in those days.

Kelly Savoie (03:51):

So what was your first job in the field? When you graduated, what did you gravitate to and how did you end up where you are today as a business owner?

Matt Rogers (04:01):

Yeah, I was so determined when I graduated from Penn State in 1994 to get a job and I did not want to come home empty-handed. My parents had invested so much into getting me to school and I'd had scholarships and loans, student loans to pay. I was extremely determined to find a role and it was a really tough time. It was 1994. The government was shut down. Newt Gingrich and Bill Clinton were fighting it out over budget issues and the National Weather Service was not hiring at that time. They had a hiring freeze going on. So a lot of options were not available to me and I wasn't really keen on staying at research. I loved weather forecasting. I really wanted to get out there and use weather forecasting as part of my job.

(04:48):

I looked everywhere. I looked at every company that had meteorologists. I looked at the AMS and the National Weather Association at the time to find out what companies were involved with those organizations. I found a company in Rockville, Maryland. I found a number of others as well, and I applied to companies that weren't even hiring. These were companies that they didn't have a job announcement out, but I knew they had meteorologists on staff. The company I applied to in Rockville was called the Earth Satellite Corporation, and they were not hiring at that time, but they were thinking about hiring. So, I was really competing against no one else really for that situation. It kind of saved them some time and the interview went really well. Then I got my first job and Washington DC area Rockville wasn't too far from Delaware, so kept

my parents somewhat happy, I think too, instead of going to the National Weather Service in Alaska or something like that to get started.

(05:47):

So it worked out. But Earth Satellite Corporation, they were mainly doing commodity weather forecasting for agriculture at that time. It was something called Cropcast, and it was really big in the 80s and the ag markets and everything. They were doing what I like to do, what I do now is energy, but energy was just deregulated at that time. They were deregulating natural gas in the early 90s, and then in the mid to late 90s, they were deregulating electricity. So our agriculture customers really started to pivot us in the direction of energy. As one of the newer employees, I took on the newer project and it really was a great ride from there, really enjoyed what I was doing.

(06:31):

I was there for 15 years. Then in 2008, which was crazy because it was the recession at that time, a group of us at that company decided to break away and start our own company. Earth Satellite Corporation doesn't exist anymore. It's been bought and sold many times, been fragmented to different companies over the years. At that time it had already been sold to a Canadian aerospace firm and they were diversifying into other areas. We really wanted to stay more in our commodity space, energy and agriculture commodities. So we saw the writing on the wall and we kind of broke away to start our own company at that point.

(07:10):

It was a really scary time because it was the bottom of the recession. We started the spring of 2009 and it was the ‘08, ‘09 recession period there. It was an interesting opportunity in one sense because everything was less expensive, like renting office space was less expensive, computer equipment was less expensive. There weren't many people getting business loans at that time because no one was starting businesses in the recession. So we were able to get our business loan through a local bank. They put all of our houses up for collateral, so if the business failed, we would lose all of our homes.

(07:51):

For all of our spouses and everything, we had to make really tough decisions. Are we really going to do this? Are we going to make this work? But it was really interesting because I feel like if you put everything on the line, I mean some of our best creative energy comes out of that sometimes. So it worked out really well. It took us about a year, 2010 was when we started to get profitability. It took us five years to end the 10-year loan that we had to start off with, and we've been profitable every year since and we don't have any debt. So it's been a really good success story for us and we've been able to stick with our core. We don't do anything else besides energy and agriculture commodities, but there is a lot of work there. That industry has evolved and changed so much over the decades now.

(08:40):

Now I've been with this company that we started at Commodity Weather Group for 17 years. So I just barely got over the 15 years at EarthSat now.

Kelly Savoie (08:49):

That's great. So when you started the new company, was EarthSat still in existence or were you able to... So you couldn't use any of the clients or customers that they had?

Matt Rogers (09:01):

Yeah, it was a tricky time. At that point, they were MDA Federal, so McDonald Duttwell & Associates had bought them, and so they weren't known as EarthSat anymore. We were still trying to use the EarthSat because brand recognition was important for the commodity markets, but yeah, it was MDA Federal at that point. And so we had to get a lawyer to help us make sure we dot our I's and cross our T's the right way.

Matt Rogers (09:32):

There turned out - there was a non-compete clause, which was a death knell for us. We really weren't able to do what we thought we could do, but it turned out the lawyer found a loophole. It wasn't written correctly. So by the grace of God, there was a loophole and it wasn't written. And as you can imagine after we left, all the contracts were redone for everybody that was still behind. So I feel terrible that I closed the door on everybody else, but there was a loophole and we were able to use that, to still be in the same sector that we're in and work with. And I had been doing it for 15 years. I knew a lot of people in the industry and my colleagues had to - there were five of us that left at the same time and we all quit on the same day on Friday the 13th in March of 2009.

(10:22):

It was quite a day. I'll never forget it, but it all worked out. I think it was meant to be. But it was a challenging situation in terms of the legal frameworks and everything like that, but it did all work out.

Emma Collins (10:39):

So what do you like most about working in the energy sector and what things do you find challenging?

Matt Rogers (10:47):

I do enjoy that challenge actually. There's so many difficult forecasts to make, assessments to make. The weather is dynamic and variable enough, but so is the energy industry too. It has evolved so much since I've started, when we started just mainly focusing on natural gas and heating oil, which is, do you get a cold winter or not, for the most part? But then when electricity got deregulated and they started trading electricity across the country, then it was an issue about the summer cooling demand and summer conditions. And then you have other issues with production of natural gas and electricity as well. Anything from West Texas, natural gas production to rigs in the Gulf of Mexico, to refineries along the Gulf Coast that are affected by energy and the electrical grid. There's so many issues there and then it kind of evolved. Now we have so much renewable energy out there.

(11:42):

West Texas is really big on wind and solar power, and we do a lot of forecasting for that area, a lot of forecasting for wind and solar in the Western US and the Southwest, and it's always evolving and changing. Years ago, ERCOT, Texas was the most volatile area to trade electricity, so the weather was so sensitive of a factor in that assessment this year. It's the Mid-Atlantic, the East PJM. I think maybe all the data centers, but they took more generation offline faster. The older, more polluting generation, they took it offline faster than they could bring new generation, cleaner generation online. So there's a little bit of a tight squeeze right now. So the Mid-Atlantic electricity prices were quite volatile this summer, but it's always a moving target. There's always new challenges and battles, and it's international too. We're doing energy forecast for Europe and Asia as well.

(12:37):

So there is always something interesting somewhere to monitor and update the clients about.

Kelly Savoie (12:44):

So you have some clients that are international as well as domestic?

Matt Rogers (12:48):

Yeah. So we have customers around the world basically, but for agriculture, it's more international than energy. They have concerns in South America. There's a number of Brazilian trading groups that we consult for. There's crop conditions in Australia to keep an eye on, the coffee cocoa in West Africa and the Southeast Asia, palm oil and other areas that we track. So my agriculture colleagues in our company do all the international agriculture focus and consulting as well. But yeah, even on the energy side, there's a lot of international interest too. So it keeps us busy, that is for sure.

Kelly Savoie (13:33):

And have you grown since you started or is it still just the core five individuals that started it?

Matt Rogers (13:40):

We've grown. We'll have our 20th employee starting in November.

Emma Collins (13:45):

Congrats.

Matt Rogers (13:47):

There's still four of the original partners with us. One of our original five left in the first year, and that first year was hard. We were working around the clock. I mean, we started our own little book club reading books about sales and all the other things. I did go and get an MBA, but I wasn't really focused on selling and we really had to start putting our sales hats on to get the business and everything. So it was difficult in that first year, but it worked out.

Kelly Savoie (14:20):

Well, that's a good segue, because I know that in addition to your meteorology degree, you have an MBA through George Mason University. So did you decide to get the MBA once you started the new company or was it prior to that and that helped you with the startup?

Matt Rogers (14:38):

Yeah, so with the growth of the energy sector in the late '90s, during the late '90s explosion, the dot-com boom and everything like that, I was fortunate enough to be pushed more into management of the energy group at Earth Satellite Corporation. So at my role there, it was optimal for me to investigate an MBA program. I did start the MBA program in 1997, and I was still working full-time, and the hours, as most of meteorology and weather, the hours aren't the best. So I was working midnight to early morning, and then I'd go to evening classes for my MBA, and so I would take two or three classes a semester, and it took me a few years. I think in 2001, I think is when I...

(15:29):

Late 2000 to early 2001 was when I graduated with my MBA degree. And so I was able to use that MBA degree to continue to help our MDA Federal acquisition and the EarthSat services all the way from 2000, 2001 all the way up to 2009 when I left. So it did work out pretty well. I just felt like it's almost like a different language. With meteorology, you study the weather, the science, you're looking at weather models and trying to interpret them and relay that information to your customers. But business is a whole different mindset, and it really helped me to get immersed in the business mindset.

(16:10):

I felt like it... This is terrible. I don't want to say how to say this, but meteorology is a tough major in my view. I mean, there's a lot of weed out courses in the first two years, the physics, the chemistry, the mathematics. I mean, I saw so many of my friends really... And me too, I struggled with some of them as well, and there were some really tough courses. I don't think the MBA courses are as difficult. If you can get through a meteorology program, you can get through an MBA program. It's just a different way of thinking, but it's very helpful, I thought. And by taking the evening courses, I was going to classes with other students who were also out in the real world. They were engaged in business activities. And in DC, it was a lot of folks at the various accounting, what they call it, the Big Five or something like that.

(16:58):

A lot of the big firms in DC had people going to that MBA program. So I was talking about issues I was dealing with in the weather world and people loved that variety, but they were talking about issues they were dealing with at work as well. So it was a lot of real world applications you can employ as you're going through your educational process. So I thought it was really helpful. I kind of recommend if someone wants to do that, to get out there in the real world and start maybe doing an operational forecasting job or any other types of weather climate profession you're interested in, and then go back to that secondary different degree program because then I think you can apply it better than going straight into an MBA or something like that right out of your bachelor's. I think it makes a big difference.

Emma Collins (17:44):

So you're also a freelance writer for the Capital Weather Gang at the *Washington Post*. How did you find out about that opportunity?

Matt Rogers (17:50):

Yes, so they made a big move in the spring. They just left the *Washington Post* in the spring and they broke away and they're now called just Capital Weather. And they're like a startup right now too, so I've really enjoyed listening to their process and getting out and starting their own startup, and I've been offering them some insight every once in a while and everything too. So Dan Stillman is one of the founders of the Capital Weather Gang and Capital Weather Now. I had been involved in hiring him at EarthSat So he and I worked together at EarthSat, I want to say it was in the early 2000s before he went on to some more research oriented work. And so we've known each other for a long time and he introduced me to this new product they're working on, and I joined right around the time or just before they got bought and absorbed into the *Washington Post* at the very beginning, I think it was around the same time that we started Commodity Weather Group too, and it was more like...

(18:50):

Which is unfortunate because we all have the same acronym, CWG, but it was around 2007, 2008 or so. And so that was a neat opportunity for me because like I said, I do a lot of international or other parts of the country, and so it was nice to have an opportunity to do some writing for local weather in the mid-Atlantic. So I've really enjoyed that opportunity to work with them as well.

Kelly Savoie (19:10):

Sounds like you've been very busy between starting a business, an MBA, doing some freelance writing. Gosh, I envy you. Good for you to...

Matt Rogers (19:21):

Yes. There are times where it can be overwhelming, that's for sure, but I do like to keep busy and it was neat for me because I've always liked to write and I do a lot of writing for our customers as well for our commodity customers. And so it's neat to be able to have that outlet to do more writing for the Capital Weather Group as well.

Kelly Savoie (19:43):

And so for our new graduates who may be listening to this podcast, do you have any advice for them? They're looking for employment in a tight job market. Are there specific industries they should be focusing on?

Matt Rogers (20:00):

I'm still pretty bullish about the commodity industry. I feel like there's so many weather sensitivities and it just seems like they keep growing. Just recently, they opened up a massive solar farm in New Mexico that feeds energy to the California ISO, and that's become a new area

of interest for our customers that we're starting to focus on. A lot of our customers, a lot of our clients have in-house meteorologists as well. A lot of times when I'm talking to customers, I'm actually talking to other meteorologists, and they could be utilities, food companies, any sort of large company, retail that has energy sensitivity or food price sensitivity. There's insurance companies, chemical companies because they use natural gas and the prices are dependent on the weather as well. Really surprising how many companies have weather sensitivity out there. I think you'd be surprised how many, or I'm surprised anyway, about how many companies hire meteorologists.

(21:05):

In the past year, there's been some companies that surprised me that we're starting to work with that I didn't even know they had meteorologists on staff. I think my best advice is to examine everything, keep an open mind, don't put the blinders on there and stay focused on one particular thing because like you said there with the tight labor market, I think you have to be a bit more creative and keep that open mind. I was hired initially at EarthSat for agriculture support and I had no agricultural experience and it really wasn't an area that I felt like I was comfortable in that I felt like I had a lot of strength in that area, but within a year I was getting the hang of it and then this whole energy market deregulation just swept over us and it became an amazing opportunity for me. So sometimes the universe is going to steer you in a direction and maybe don't fight it.

(21:51):

If there's an opportunity that comes along and say, "That's not exactly what I want," just go for it because you might find out it will eventually be what you want and it will be the right thing. So just keep an open mind, I think.

Kelly Savoie (22:03):

And you mentioned too, previously, that you were applying to positions where they didn't even have...

Matt Rogers (22:08):

Yeah.

Kelly Savoie (22:08):

I mean companies that didn't even have open positions, so I guess that's some pretty good advice too, to not rule anything out just because they don't have a job opportunity posted.

Matt Rogers (22:18):

Yeah, that was a big thing because then you're not in the competition at that point, you're talking to folks that maybe they're on the edge of hiring, but they haven't put out an announcement yet or something, but it also gives you opportunities to talk to a lot of people as well. So yeah, stay creative, don't - keep an open mind on where you apply and what you're open to doing.

Emma Collins (22:46):

And if you were hiring a staff person, what types of skills and experience would you be looking for to fill a role in the commodity sector?

Matt Rogers (22:54):

We mostly have two sets of employees on our team. It's funny, there's going to be 20 of us by November and 19 of us are meteorologists. All the founders are, and some of us do HR, some of us do contracts and account management and everything like that, but we're all meteorologists except for one, and he's an electrical engineer and he's our sales guy. And so he had the harder major, he's doing, in my view, the harder job, but he loves it. He's done such a great job with it. But the two groups that we have besides ourselves is the engineers, developers, and they're all meteorologists as well, but you want to have a firm programming capability.

(23:39):

Being able to learn quickly new languages, which my understanding from them is that once you figure out some of the basic ones, it's easy to adapt to other ones as well. Most of them have advanced degrees like in a master's or higher, and it seems like in those advanced degree programs, you get more programming experience. I certainly didn't in my bachelor's, so that tends to be involved as well and something we look for too. And then on the operational consulting and forecasting side of things, pretty much looking for a solid background in meteorology and especially in the forecasting side of things and folks that work really well in teams but can also work individually. I think the most important thing I like to look for is having people with a very positive personality. We really try to hire nice people. At times, I was involved with hiring at my former company, but not all the time, and we didn't always hire the nicest people, so we learned our lessons.

(24:39):

We've learned a lot of lessons from our previous company, and we've been able to take that to this one. It's been really great. So yeah, definitely, hiring nice people.

Kelly Savoie (24:50):

Yeah. So everyone out there listening, you got to make sure you're nice. Be nice.

Matt Rogers (24:54):

Yep.

Kelly Savoie (24:56):

Get some manners. Well, we're so grateful for everything you've told us about your career. However, before you go, we always ask our guests one last fun question at the end of our show. So I would like to ask you, what is your all-time favorite book/movie?

Matt Rogers (25:14):

Yeah, I grew up in the '80s. I love *Star Wars*. I'm a *Star Wars* geek, and there was always that split between *Star Wars* and *Star Trek*, and I know *Star Trek*'s the more scientific one, but for whatever reason, I always gravitate towards *Star Wars*. I like to read science fiction as well, like *Enders Game* and things like that, but I think it's just basically telling a good story. I think of that in terms of my work too. I try to make the weather interesting for our customers and tell a story when I'm explaining what's going on and tell it in the form of a narrative, and that's what I gravitate towards for entertainment as well. I think it's so important to take a break from work and just unplug, read a great book or watch a movie where you don't have your phone nearby, you're not checking work emails or things like that.

(26:07):

So any sort of escapism like that is a big go-to for me. It's a good mental reboot, a good break.

Kelly Savoie (26:15):

I didn't realize, was *Star Wars* a book? There are books, but...

Matt Rogers (26:18):

No, it wasn't. Yeah, they wrote some books in the *Star Wars* universe, and so when I was a teenager, I was reading those as well. But yeah, it was originally a movie script and everything, but I just loved the escapism, I think, of the whole thing.

Kelly Savoie (26:37):

Yeah. And still, *The Empire Strikes Back* is one of my favorite movies of all time. It was so good.

Matt Rogers (26:44):

Me too, and it's the first one I watched.

Kelly Savoie (26:45):

Oh, really? You didn't watch them in order?

Matt Rogers (26:48):

No, I watched them out of order because it was 77. I was only five, and I don't think my parents took me and didn't want to take me, and then when *Empire Strikes Back* came about in 1980 was the first one we saw, and I was like, "Wow, I got to see how this started." So I watched them. Yeah, but you're right, *Empire Strikes Back* was just my first *Star Wars* movie that I watched, and it was just... Yeah. And there's plot twists, there's all sorts of things, so it was good.

Kelly Savoie (27:12):

And you have Harrison Ford, Han Solo. I mean, he's the best. Come on. We all know he's the best.

Matt Rogers (27:18):

I know.

Emma Collins (27:20):

Well, thanks so much for joining us, Matt, and for sharing your work experiences with us.

Matt Rogers (27:24):

Great. Thanks for taking time to talk to me as well. It's always fun to talk about all this, and hopefully some helpful information there somewhere too.

Kelly Savoie (27:32):

Well, that's our show for today. Please join us next time, Rain or Shine. Clear Skies Ahead: Conversations About Careers in Meteorology and Beyond is a podcast by the American Meteorological Society. Our show is edited by Johnny Lay. Technical direction is provided by Peter Killelea. Our theme music is composed and performed by Steve Savoie, and the show is hosted by Emma Collins and Kelly Savoie. You can learn more about the show online at www.ametsoc.org/clearskies, and you can contact us at skypodcast@ametsoc.org if you have any feedback or would like to become a future guest.