



Thinking Big

Blue Skies Consulting Uses Teamwork to Land Large Projects

Once referred to as “the little engine that could” by its owners, Blue Skies Consulting started exceeding expectations as soon as it began.

Tami Wiggins, with more than 15 years of experience in the mapping, surveying, photogrammetry and remote-sensing industries, and Mike Racine, a commercial pilot and large-mapping project specialist with more than 4,500 hours of flight time, co-founded Blue Skies Consulting in January 1999. Driven by a strong work ethic and an entrepreneurial spirit, the two gathered together several more professionals to form a closely-knit aerial team committed to delivering outstanding results. Through hard work and dedication the five-person firm based in Belen, New Mexico, has been part of some of the biggest, most complex aerial photo projects in the country.

The National Resources Inventory (NRI), a program run by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, is one such project. In its entirety, the NRI team captures 70,000 images each year in every county of the United States and its territories. The logistics of acquiring several thousand sites while adhering to extensive photo acquisition requirements are quite complex. The odds of winning a part of the contract seemed stacked against a smaller firm such as Blue Skies, which didn't own an airplane or camera and was still working to establish itself when Wiggins and Racine decided to submit a proposal for the NRI in 2001.

“In business, you have to be ready when an opportunity presents itself. It did, and we accepted the challenge,” said Racine president and chief pilot at Blue Skies Consulting.



Blue Skies Consulting (L to R) Tami Wiggins (CEO), Mike Racine (President), Megan Marsee (Assistant) Daniel Poli (Maintenance Director)

Weeks later, Blue Skies was informed that it had won a portion of the NRI project, competing against firms more than ten times its size. “We put together a super proposal, but the reality is that we wouldn't have been awarded the work if the USDA wasn't willing to take a chance on a start-up,” said Wiggins, CEO at Blue Skies Consulting. During its first season on the NRI, the Blue Skies team captured 2,025 individual photo sites, using a leased airplane and camera that Racine had been flying for one of Blue Skies' other clients. During the same year, Blue Skies landed another project of more than 3,000 flight line miles at 1:24000 scale. It took over six months to complete the projects, which was further complicated by the events of 9/11. “We had many sleepless nights that year, but in the end, we delivered,” Racine said.

Blue Skies was praised by its client for the professional results it delivered. After two successful seasons as part of the NRI team, the United States Department of Agriculture presented the company

with its “Woman-Owned Small Business of the Year” award at a ceremony held in Washington, D.C. in June 2003.

“The focus and determination of our staff have helped us take on the most challenging projects and complete outstanding work,” said Wiggins. “It was an honor to be recognized by our clients and by the aerial photography industry. The award served to validate the effort we put forth.”

The recognition helped Blue Skies gain other large projects throughout the United States for the National Forest Service, National Park Service, and Bureau of Land Management. In fact,

Blue Skies has grown to specialize in handling large projects, the majority of which are more than 1,500 flight line miles. Blue Skies participation in the NRI project has grown too. During the 2004 flying season, Blue Skies acquired 4,676 sites, covering all of California, Nevada, Arizona and New Mexico. In March 2005, the company was awarded another five year contract with the NRI.

Maximizing Capabilities with Chrome 200

Instrumental in helping Blue Skies to achieve better, faster results has been the utilization of Agfa's Chrome 200 film. It gives Blue Skies better quality and color saturation than other films, and allows the team to collect more images during a flying season.

“When there is a clear day, we need to accomplish as much as we can,” explained Racine. “The wide exposure latitude and higher film speed of the Chrome 200 film result in better shadow penetration, which allows us to extend the photographic window, so we can fly more hours on a good day.”

Agfa's technical team helped Aerial Photo Lab Inc., a start-up company based in Daytona Beach, FL, set up an E-6 film processor to handle the Chrome 200 processing. Blue Skies was impressed with Aerial Photo Lab's professionalism, pricing, and quick turn-around time.

"A product is only as good as the service that accompanies it. Agfa goes the extra mile to make sure we have what we need, when we need it," Racine said, adding that Blue Skies had decided to purchase film from Agfa for the duration of its 5-year NRI contract.

Examining the Digital Divide

While keeping abreast of the latest aerial trends, Blue Skies studies new technology carefully. Wiggins and Racine both agree that a divide exists between digital and film-based imaging for the aerial market, in terms of functionality and cost-effectiveness.



Flower Fields (San Diego, CA) captured on Agfa's Chrome 200 film.

years ago. But I can view, make contact prints, or scan a roll of aerial film from fifty years ago without having to worry about file format or media type. There is no question that digital cameras for photogrammetric applications are in our future, but film is the safest, most reliable way to archive imagery for now," said Racine.

This year, Blue Skies is investing in a Wehrli RM-6 photogrammetric scanner. The scanner will allow it to provide customers with the best of both worlds - a high-quality, archival product that can be scanned to produce digital files that fit into a soft-copy photogrammetry workflow - thereby bridging the digital divide.

Blue Skies Ahead

In its relatively short lifetime, Blue Skies Consulting has grown from a fledgling company to a respected name in the aerial photography industry. In addition to now owning two cameras and two aircraft, the company recently completed construction of a 10,000 square-foot hangar and office complex on Blue Skies Drive at the Belen Alexander Airport. The positive, energetic atmosphere Blue Skies established from the start is still characteristic of the company today.

"We constantly strive to maintain a company that is focused on supporting our employees and helping everyone to reach his or her own greatest potential. We do everything we can to encourage an environment where our staff looks forward to work each day," Wiggins said.

It's that underlying philosophy that is helping the Blue Skies team to grow and the company to evolve into one of the most accomplished in the industry.

Q&A with John Brandes



A Note From John Brandes

One aspect of living and working in today's world is constant change. This, no doubt, is enabled by rapidly evolving electronic technology that effects everything we do, from personal phone calls to managing our business.

The most recent change to our Aerial Newsletter involves the method of distribution. As most information we receive today is distributed via the internet, Agfa is taking the opportunity to revise our Aerial Newsletter, and distribute it electronically as well.

We will continue to feature our aerial customers, dedicating each Newsletter to one customer. In addition, my column will be included, addressing current questions or providing information updates. Since we will be communicating via the internet, it is important that you provide us with any email addresses where you wish to receive our communication updates.

I hope you enjoy our new Agfa Aerial e-Newsletter.

